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The Rio Kid Western

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By LEE E. WELLS

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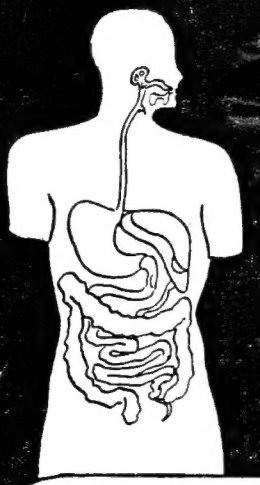

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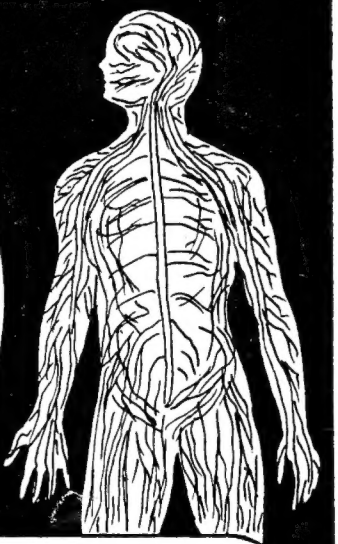

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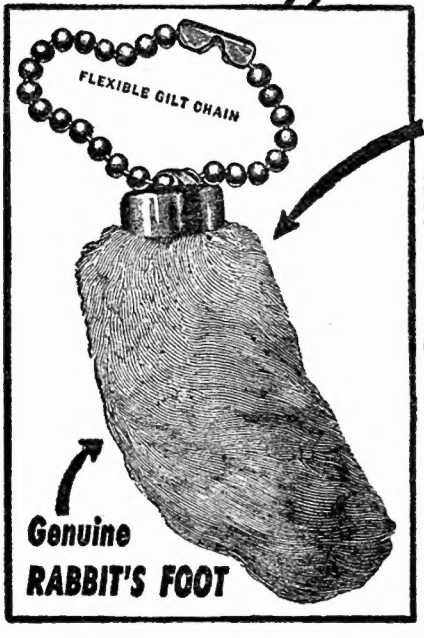

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The Rio Kid Western

Vol. XII, No. 2 — *EVERY STORY BRAND NEW* — March, 1946

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All braggin' aside, Buck Norton of the Cross-in-a-box sure has savvy!

and

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A department concluded by America's foremost rodeo expert

Also See Portraits and Biographies of Pat Garrett and Judge Roy Bean on Pages 33 and 37.

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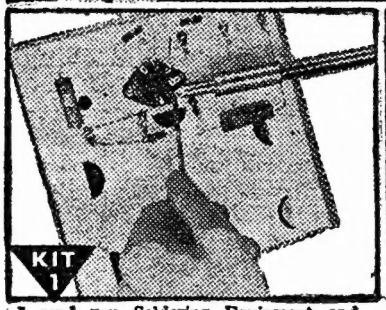

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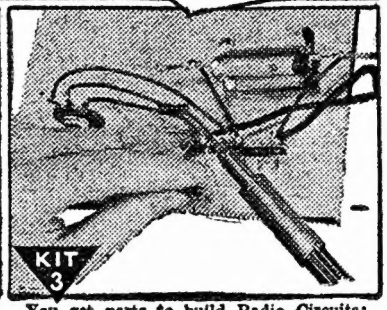

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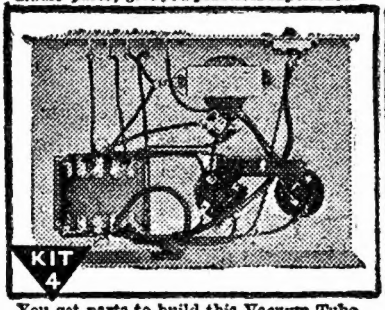

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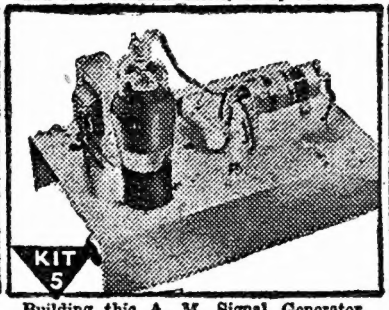

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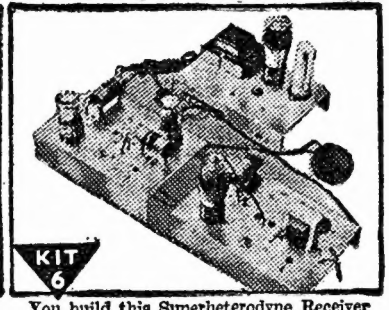

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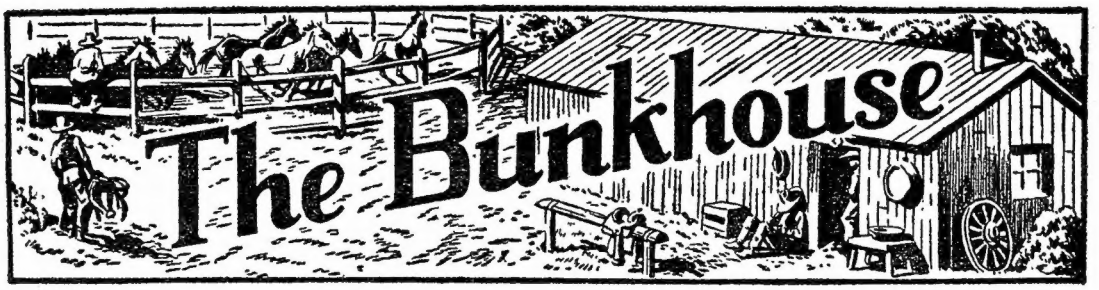

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COME right in to the old Bunk House, waddies, you know you are always welcome. It gets a mite lonesome around the Bunk House when we don't have any visitors, so just draw up a chair, one of those two willow rockers there. Willow rockers are a bit uncommon around bunk houses, but Sundown Slim gathered those willow limbs down by the lake and made those chairs.

Slim likes to fool around with such things, it gets him out of some of the more strenuous work, and the boss lets him do pretty much as he pleases around this spread because he has been here a long time.

Slim and I were sitting here the other night gazing into the open fire and talking about things that happened a long time ago, and you know it is remarkable how far back a fellow can remember those things that kinder stick out along the road of life. I can recall, just about fifty years back, the first murderer I ever saw arrested.

The boys and myself had gone into town that day. It was Saturday and the cowboys from all the spreads within riding distance usually came in on Saturday. Some arrived during the day, and these would in all probability go back and stay on the ranch that night and look after things while the other crew came into town to mingle with the folks at night, and, well, just to "blow off a little steam," as many of them referred to their activities on their Saturday night visits to town.

A Murderer's Arrest

Well, to get back to this first murderer, I don't even know or remember his name, but he was standing right near me and we were both watching a poker game where the stakes were running pretty high.

All of a sudden the sheriff, who had come into the place so quietly that he was unnoticed, suddenly stuck his forty-five against the ribs of the supposed murderer and said: "Reach, yuh're under arrest!"

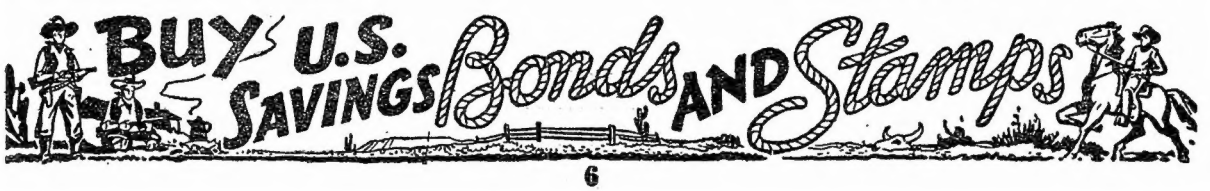
Sheriff Straley was standing practically right next to me. Neither the sheriff nor the wanted man seemed to bat an eye. Slowly, the man raised his hands above his head. The sheriff reached over with his left hand and lifted the man's gun out of his holster, and then snapped handcuffs on him.

The sheriff had come over from the county seat more than twenty miles away, and he decided to start back with his prisoner at once and so did not put him in the little local calaboose. He guarded his prisoner while he sent a cowboy over to the livery stable to get a buckboard in which to take the prisoner to jail at the county seat.

I will never forget that prisoner's face. I was just a kid, and just starting to ride to town with the cowboys, and it was my first experience of that kind. I can even remember the little kind of a song the prisoner half hummed, half sang, while they waited for the rig from the stable, and as he sat on the board sidewalk in front of the saloon with the sheriff standing nearby, one line of the song has remained in my memory all these years. It was: "I'd of give her every cent I could rake and scrape, if she hadn't been so mean."

It's strange, but I do not believe I have ever heard another human being sing that little snatch of song, and yet this man arrested for murder, so impressed my youthful mind that I have never forgotten it. Sun down Slim, too, was of the opinion that anything that really is so impressive that it registers in one's memory, will be remem-

(Continued on page 8)



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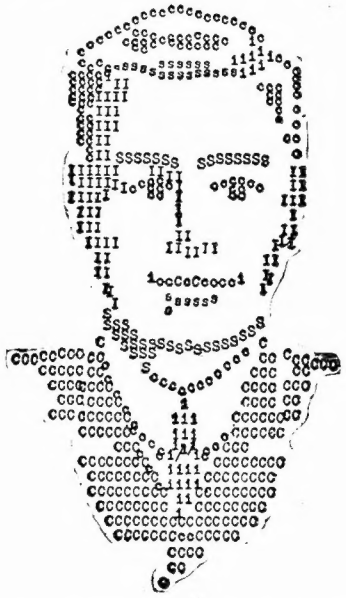

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THE BUNKHOUSE

(Continued from page 6)

bered for a long, long time.

Out in Montana I have a very dear old-time friend, "Packsaddle" Ben Greenough. He has been a stalwart and vigorous man until the past few years. Now in his eighty-second year, his health has begun to fail. He is now moving from his home and ranch to California on doctor's orders that he escape the rigors of another Montana winter.

He has always loved Montana, has loved the Beartooth Mountains at the foot of which his ranch is located. He has been one of the best non-professional ice skaters in the state, and has loved those Montana winters—but he must now, on account of his age and health, leave the snow and icy winds of his home state.

Ben Greenough has lived in that section of Montana for more than sixty years, yet he remembers things that happened when he was but a kid riding over the rough mountainous country at a time when there were plenty of badmen around that section. It was then a territory, before it became a state.

An Old Fort

On one of his many roving trips some sixty years ago Ben discovered the ruins of an old fort-like structure which presumably was the fort of early day prospectors who built it to try and fight off the Indians while they prospected for minerals.

So far as is known, none knew of the existence of the old fort ruins until they were discovered by him. He also discovered what seemed to be an abandoned robbers' roost, or bandit hideout, complete with what was once a formidable defense structure, and corrals for many horses.

This outlaw hideout was equipped with an entrance that had a commanding view of the approach, and a hidden exit or secret approach so arranged that it would have taken practically a regiment to have stormed the defense successfully in an attack upon the stronghold.

Ben Greenough knew many of the badmen of years ago, as well as many of the noted peace officers of the Northwest. From older pioneers than himself, pioneers who have now passed on, but who left behind a wealth of tales of adventure. Ben has learned many thrilling tales of Western incidents in the old days. The days when those who first went West were struggling to keep living and win the West to civilization.

Ben's keen mind has retained the memory of those tales, and it is through such men as he that we of today can enjoy the stories of

(Continued on page 10)

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THE BUNKHOUSE

(Continued from page 8)

incidents that occurred three quarters of a century ago. They are handed down from one generation to another and will still be handed down many generations to come, for the West had many colorful characters, whose stories are well worth repeating over and over.

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Plummer, not being a gambler, started a bakery and for a time seemed content to bake bread, pies and rolls for the populace.

Whether Plummer idolized the flashily dressed, gun toting gamblers, or whether the lure of gold which he saw changing hands rapidly in the big gambling games, caused him to grow tired of the bakery business is not known, but he decided to become a gambler and gunman.

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(Continued on page 90)

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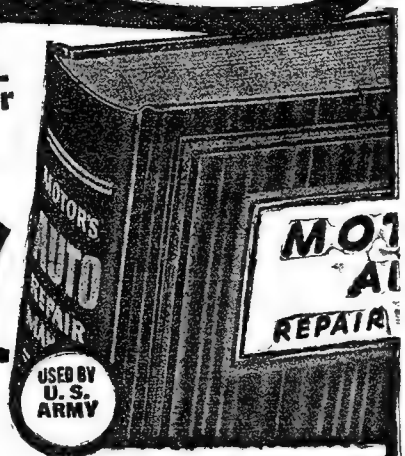

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Judge Bean rapped for order with a revolver butt, glared at the prisoner and demanded: "Guilty or not guilty?" (Chap. IX)

VINEGAROON

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The Rio Kid rides into a turbulent town to ferret out the killers, tinhorns, thieves and renegades who are sabotaging the Sunset Railroad and bringing ruin to innocent victims!

CHAPTER I

The Sunset

WHILE yet several miles west of San Antonio, the two riders came on the new rails, like steel bands leading westward atop the raw cut of the right-of-way. The rider on the mouse-colored dun drew rein, watching the approach of a long work and supply train.

His blue shirt was open at the throat, revealing a powerful neck. His legs were encased in Cavalry blue riding breeches, with a yellow stripe down the side, and a broad-brimmed Army Stetson shaded his clear eyes and his clean-cut, tanned face. Broad shoulders beneath a double-breasted Army tunic tapered down to a narrow waist encircled by a black gun-belt. Heavy Colts snugged close to each thigh and a carbine rode in his saddle boot. But had a closer examination been possible it would have shown he was still more thoroughly armed—with two hideout guns inside his shirt.

The work train he had stopped to watch

came down the track and the engineer lifted a gauntleted hand. The rider in blue returned the friendly gesture, then watched the heavy flats, loaded with rails and ties, go rattling by. His companion pushed a high-crowned sombrero back from an alert, coffee-colored face and offered a comment.

"Ah, General, she is like the Union Pacific up at Corinne, no?"

"Looks like it, Celestino." The Rio Kid nodded. He pushed back his own Stetson, revealing close-cropped chestnut hair, and wiped away the beads of sweat that had formed along his high forehead. "Of course, some of our old friends—like General Dodge—won't be here."

The last car passed and the Rio Kid lifted the reins, wheeling the dun to ride alongside the right-of-way toward San Antonio, a few miles to the east. He grinned at this eagerly questioning Celestino Mireles, who for so long now had been his closest friend and constant companion.

"Yuh're mighty shore we're goin' to work on this railroad, *amigo,*" he said. "Remember, all we've got to make us think so is a letter to this Colonel Pierce who's in charge of buildin' it."

"Senor"—Celestino shook his head and his dark eyes danced—"when you get the letters, the trouble she's always come."

The Rio Kid laughed and straightened in the saddle. He showed the marks of long years in the Army and others since the conclusion of the bitter Civil War. He had been a captain of Cavalry, wearing the blue of the Union, and had served with distinction under Custer, Sheridan, Dodge and other great leaders. Four years of the grim struggle had been sufficient for him however, and he had been eager to return to his boyhood home along the Rio Grande when peace had been declared.

BUT a life of peaceful Border ranching was not in the cards for Captain Bob Pryor. For on his return, he not only found that his home had been burned, but his mother and father murdered by renegades. The tragedy had put a core of hardened steel in his character and started him on the vengeance trail. He had brought to justice the renegades who had been responsible for the tragedy, but his restlessness remained with Bob Pryor. So it had been that in the hours of his own deepest grief he had dedicated his life to others. Since then he had roamed far over the great West, his guns ever in the service of law and order.

In time he had come to be called the Rio Kid, a fighting man whose deeds were almost legendary. Honest men knew him as a steadfast ally in their battles against evil and injustice. Renegades feared him and hated him, for he had brought plenty of their kind to the gallows or to Boot Hill.

Wherever the Rio Kid rode, his trailmate, Celestino Mireles, was sure to be somewhere about. Long ago Bob Pryor had saved the young Mexican from a group of Border killers, since then Celestino had attached himself to his rescuer like a bur. His skin was the coffee-and-cream shade of the high-born Mexican. He was always smiling, his black eyes dancing and laughing. His face had a hawklike contour, the cheekbones high. His short jacket and flare trousers were of dark velvet, dust-stained now, and a red sash held his Colts.

The two companions of the trail rode steadily eastward, striking a dirt highway that would take them directly into San Antonio. They met long lines of heavy freighting-wagons, some of them supplying the railroad building west, others taking merchandise to distant El Paso and beyond.

Reaching their destination at last, the two riders pulled into the walk a scant two blocks from the Alamo. They knotted the reins loosely over the rack and crossed the walk, joining a throng of people who were pushing through the wide doors of a low building. They entered a long room, filled with clerks, lined on the far side by private offices. The Rio Kid moved easily through the crowd up to a counter.

"Colonel Pierce," he told a harried clerk and handed him a letter that he pulled from his blue shirt pocket. The clerk glanced at the writing then looked up, pleased surprise in his eyes.

"Yes, Captain Pryor," he said. "I'm sure the Colonel will see you right away."

He hurried off and returned in just a moment, opening a swing gate for the Rio Kid and Celestino. The Rio Kid's quick eyes swept across the desks as he threaded his way through them.

that Leads to a Gun-Roaring Showdown!

"Things look mighty busy," he commented.

The clerk sighed. "This is almost a dull day for us, Captain. It takes an unbelieveable lot of supplies to build a railroad, and a tremendous amount of clerical work to keep check on them. Then when you lose some and they have to be replaced—" He broke off and opened a door to a private office. "The Colonel is waiting."

BOB PRYOR

The Rio Kid stepped into a little box of a room. The floor was bare and the walls were relieved by a single wide window and a large scale map of the Southwest from San Antonio to the California coast. Two red lines moved across the map, one from San Diego and the other westward from San Antonio. One stopped at El Paso and the other at the Pecos River.

The only mark of luxury in the room was the desk, a huge thing piled high with papers. A man arose from his chair and circled the desk, his hand outstretched.

"Glad to meet you, Captain Pryor," he greeted. "I appreciate your making the speed you did in getting here."

Colonel Pierce was a tall, slender man with square shoulders that instantly marked his service in the Army. Dark eyes framed a high-bridged, hawk-nose scored by deep lines at the root. His hair was black and thick, heavily touched by gray. He spoke with a clipped surety, his wide, thin lips precisely forming the words. He acknowledged the introduction to Celestino with a handclasp and waved his two visitors to chairs.

"I'm a busy man and I assume your time is of value to you, Captain Pryor," he said without formality. "I checked very thoroughly into your record before I wrote to you. General Dodge highly recommends you and wherever I have asked, I have had good word about you."

"That's always nice to know." The Rio Kid smiled and flushed a little. "Yuh knew General Dodge personally?"

"Not exactly," Colonel Pierce smiled grimly. "In the last war my men tried to blow up the military bridges he built, or Dodge re-

paired railroads and bridges that I destoyed. I served the Confederacy, Captain."

"With honor, sir, I'm shore," the Rio Kid replied instantly.

COLONEL PIERCE smiled and returned to his seat behind the desk.

"I've heard of your work with the Union Pacific at Corinne. I have the information on your clean-up of the mining trouble-holes in Colorado. Pat Garrett speaks highly of your work in New Mexico. I therefore wrote to you. I have a job here that is exactly tailored to your abilities."

"I'll be glad to consider it, sir," murmured the Rio Kid.

Pierce turned and pointed to the wall map.

"Our problem down here is somewhat like the Union Pacific's in Utah and Nevada, Captain. The Sunset Lines build westward, along a survey approved before the war by Jefferson Davis. When we meet the Southern Pacific, the continent will be spanned in the south as well as across its center. You are famliar with end-of-track towns?"

The Rio Kid shrugged his broad shoulders.

"Too familiar, Colonel. The Union Pacific was plagued by 'em."

"The Sunset is, too, Captain. But we have an added trouble. This crowd of cutthroats, killers, tinhorns, thieves and renegades seems to be directed by some malignant brain behind them all. That is very dangerous and it threatens to ruin the Sunset."

The Rio Kid whistled soundlessly and hitched his chair a little closer to the desk. Celestino noticed the move and his white teeth flashed in a quick grin. He knew the signs, and he could sense adventure coming down wind.

"End-of-track dives generally prey upon the railroad workers and construction crews, Colonel," the Rio Kid said. "They are robbed of their earnin's, true enough, but seldom is the railroad itself crippled serious by 'em."

Pierce stepped to the map and his finger touched the line that marked the Pecos River.

"We have built a high bridge here across Eagle Nest Canyon, Captain. We have established a temporary advanced headquarters west of the river at a town aptly named Vinegaroon."

"An ugly-lookin' insect," the Rio Kid murmured. "Looks like a tarantula and is said to be poisonous."

"Believe me, the town *is* poisonous. It's also an ugly place and the name fits." Pierce tapped the map again. "We have erected warehouses at Vinegaroon to store the rails, ties, building equipment and food supplies for our construction crews. The scum of all the Southwest has also gathered there and Vinegaroon is wide open, a ructious-on-wheels place. Boot Hill is growing almost as fast as the town, Captain."

"Corinne and Julesburg again," the Rio Kid remarked.

"Certainly," agreed Colonel Pierce, "but with an added touch. We're close to the Mexican border. So far as county law is concerned, there isn't any west of the Pecos. The Texas Rangers are trying their best to keep law and order and they're succeeding within limits. But even a Ranger can't cross into Mexico."

"I'm beginnin' to savvy where yuh're headin'," the Rio Kid said, his sharp eyes lighted.

"Exactly. We've had equipment and supplies stolen right out of our warehouses. It's rushed across the Rio Grande and disappears. Some of those renegades have been bold enough to murder our watchmen and guards. We've lost foremen to gunfire and always in a fight that seems to be deliberately urged on. Key workers have dropped out of sight and we find their bones a month or so later. Those men are hard to replace, Captain, and the Sunset falls behind the building schedule, not counting the monetary loss in property and supplies."

The Rio Kid leaned forward.

"You haven't said it, Colonel, but I gather yuh think the Southern Pacific may be behind this trouble."

PIERCE passed his hand wearily over his face, and sighed.

"I don't know, Captain, and I'd hate to think so. But a railroad has many people interested in its progress besides its officers. Stock gamblers may be trying to raise SP values by hamstringing the Sunset. For every mile of track laid, both the SP and Sunset receives money and land subsidies from the Government."

"If the Sunset is crippled, then the Southern Pacific is that much ahead." The Rio Kid leaned back and narrowly studied the map. "What yuh want me to do, Colonel?"

Pierce lost his harried look and once more became cold and incisive. "I'm in need of a man to bring law and order along the rails. I need a man who will forget such things as

A blast of lead swept the street as outlaw gunmen cut loose and the Rio Kid's sixes cleared leather with blurring speed (CHAPTER XV)

county lines and the Rio Grande when he goes after a renegade or other killer. I need a man who is fast with his guns, who has plenty of courage. I want someone with enough imagination and brains to track down and uncover the person who is behind this organized trouble the Sunset Lines is facing."

"Yuh're askin' for a heap, Colonel."

"I'm asking for you, Captain Pryor. You're the man who fits the picture. I'm offering the job to you. Frankly, if I were in your place, I'd turn it down flat. I hope you don't."

CHAPTER II

Guns at Night

AN HOUR later, Colonel Pierce had reviewed the Rio Kid's duties on the new job. He would head a band of railroad trouble-shooters and the Rio Kid's word would be law along the whole of the Sunset tracks, from day-laborer up to supervising engineer. All the power of the railroad would be at the Rio Kid's disposal.

"If you feel that Vinegaroon, or any other town, can get along without a gambler, tinhorn or renegade, give the orders," Colonel Pierce said grimly. "I've made arrangements with the Texas Rangers and they'll work right along with you. That will also be true of local authorities wherever they are. Frankly, there are few sheriffs who get nearer the Pecos; beyond it none at all. But as a free lance you have an open field."

"Yuh've handed me a big job, Colonel," the Rio Kid said gravely.

"I know you can handle it. You'll leave for Vinegaroon right away, Captain. Mr. Abbott, who is one of the Sunset officials—a hale, hearty Californian it should be a pleasure to work under, will be here any moment. He'll give you the details of any trouble you may expect on your trip westward. You can call on Mr. Abbott for anything you need. He has my orders to comply with any wish of yours, and will be glad to obey, for of course his position on the Sunset is—ah—fairly minor."

The office door opened and a giant of a man came striding in. He stood at least six feet, and must have topped the scales at well over two hundred pounds. He had a big, square face, jovial and friendly. His wide lips pulled back from strong square teeth in a genial smile. Blue eyes crinkled at the corners. His cheeks were full, just a shade this side of fat. He looked much more like a well-fed rancher, in fact, than a railroad man.

"Just got in to Santone, Colonel," he boomed, "and trotted myself right over here soon as I knew you were waitin'."

"Meet Captain Pryor," Colonel Pierce said. "Pryor, this is Morton Abbott. He has charge of all supply and personnel along the Sunset right-of-way. He'll take you to Vinegaroon."

Abbott wheeled and stuck out a thick and powerful hand.

"Glad to know yuh, Pryor. Heard a lot about yuh. Rio Kid—ain't that what they call yuh?"

Pierce broke in on his booming.

"You will acquaint Captain Pryor with all facts necessary for him to know, Abbott. You will equip such men as he may choose as his assistants, and cooperate in every way. That is understood."

"From the ground up." Abbott smiled.

His grip around the Rio Kid's fingers was like a constricting steel band. His shoulders were immense and his chest was barrel-thick. He wore a dark business suit, relieved by a light colored vest that strained at the buttons across his torso. A gun-belt circled his thick waist, the holster tied down against the trousers that were of fine material. His feet were encased in heavy boots that showed the marks of long and hard travel.

"I've got some records to check over, Pryor," he said, "and some requisition to make out. Can yuh find somethin' to do to entertain yoreself in San Antonio till around midnight?"

"I think so." The Rio Kid smiled.

"My special car is on a sidin' at the station," explained Abbott. "The work train will pick it up at midnight. Yuh can board it any time yuh want after eleven. Or yuh can come by the office here and I'll see yuh get on it."

"I can find the station," the Rio Kid said pleasantly. He turned and shook hands with Colonel Pierce. "I'll do the best I can on this job, Colonel."

"That's what I expect," Pierce snapped. "You've got just one order from me. Clean up the Sunset right-of-way immediately and completely. That's your sole job and I'll back

you to the limit. Mr. Abbott will fill in the details on the train. Good-by and good luck, Captain."

The Rio Kid and Celestino left the office and worked their way through the busy clerks to the walk. They mounted their horses and rode slowly through San Antonio's crowded streets. The Rio Kid's sharp eyes darkened thoughtfully as Saber skillfully picked his way between the heavy wagons that literally filled the street. Celestino watched his companion and at last rode up beside him.

"Thees job she's sound very easy, no? Colonel Pierce theenk maybe we clean up Vinegaroon like that." He snapped his fingers.

The Rio Kid slowly shook his head. "No, the Colonel knows what's ahead, or has a good idea. But he picks a man for the job and leaves it up to the man to solve the problem. Pierce is a good executive, amigo. When he trusts a man, he trusts him all the way."

They were close to the station and the Rio Kid saw the single passenger coach sitting on a siding. Beyond the tracks stood a big saloon, the batwings constantly fanning as men streamed in and out. The Rio Kid moved up to the railroad car and swung out of saddle.

"Railroaders and construction men use that saloon, Celestino. There's bound to be a heap of gossip and a man can learn a lot just by listenin'."

CELESTINO followed the Rio Kid through the swing doors and into the big saloon. The room was crowded, mostly by cowboys and men of the town. There was a liberal sprinkling of Irish construction workers in one corner and the Rio Kid drifted that way.

He and Celestino sat down at a nearby table. One of the Irishman talked fairly loudly so that it rose above the noise of the saloon. The rest listened to him, nodding now and then.

"—trouble shooter they say we'll be havin'," the Rio Kid heard, "and would it be too soon? Shure, and what would ye think would have saved Paddy Rourke? Dead we found him at the bottom of Eagle Nest Canyon and Paddy shure-footed as a mountain goat."

"Why?" one of the group asked.

"Who knows why?" The first speaker cursed. "Would that double-tongued Garnet Malan be behind it? Him and Paddy had their words when Garnet's card cheats took the money of such as us. Paddy would have taken the boys in and pulled Malan's tent around his ears."

"And why not do it still?"

"Arragh! Have ye not seen the tough gunhands that walk the street of Vinegaroon? Have ye not looked at Boot Hill and counted the earth mounds that once were men? Ye'd be spittin' right in the eye of that Devil's imp, Spike Bannion, as black an Irishman as there is alive."

The Rio Kid gave Celestino a sharp, knowing glance. The young Mexican's smile was gone and he slowly rubbed his holster. He caught the Rio Kid's look and shrugged. The Irishman was talking again.

"Shure and there's more trouble to come. The Southern Pacific is beyond El Paso and it lays track twice to our once. Shure, and I'd like to know who is seein' to that. 'Twas just last month a warehouse burned and with it every scraper the Sunset owned. How long a delay was there before we could make roadbed once more?"

The group of Irishmen broke up and drifted away, except for one man. He sat at the table, staring into the depths of a whisky bottle. He was small and wiry, with the wrinkled face of a monkey, reddened by the sun. Despite his small size there was power in his thick arms and in the swift way he moved his body as he hunched forward.

The Rio Kid signaled Celestino and stepped over to the table. The man looked up, reddish brows drawing down over clear blue eyes.

"Heard yuh talkin' about the Sunset," the Rio Kid said with a friendly smile. "I aim to work for that outfit and I thought yuh could give me some tips."

"And what would ye be doin'?" the man asked.

"I ain't shure—yet." The Rio Kid sat down. "I'll find out when I get to end-of-track."

The Irishman drew back and carefully studied the Rio Kid's supple body.

"Probably at the warehouses," he said judiciously. He extended his hand. "The name's Tim Kelly. I boss the toughest bunch of graders ye'll see this side of the Divil's kingdom. I'd be glad to know ye."

Tim had a great deal of information to offer about the number of men employed on the Sunset the average amount of track

laid each day, the problems the engineers and workers faced as they cut out into the hot desert just north of the Big Bend country. Despite the heat and hard work, few died of sunstroke.

"Shure it's a knife in the back, a club or a gun," Tim said. "Men like Malan hire killers that are naught for a life."

"There's enough like yoreself," the Rio Kid said easily, "that could band together and tear down Malan's place."

"Shure, but we fear the railroad would not stand for such doin's. Me bucko, there's many a man in my crew that would enjoy tearing down Malan's tents."

"Vinegaroon sounds bad," the Rio Kid said reflectively.

Tim Kelly laughed, a sound with nothing pleasant in it. "Ye'll be seein' for yerself," he said. "Ye'll be clashin' with Spike Bannion's bad boys. If ye need help, look up Tim Kelly. Ye'll find me gradin' somewhere beyant the town, except weekends and paydays."

"And then?"

"Shure, and where's a man to blow off steam and have his fun except in Vinegaroon? Ye'll find me somewheres about at such times. The best to ye, son, and take care."

He arose, nodded and smiled and walked away toward the distant batwings. Celestino was marking the edge of the table with his thumbnail. He caught the Rio Kid's eye, smiled, and shrugged expressively.

"General, I theenk maybe we earn every peso on these job."

"Looks like it, Celestino. It's shure stackin' up to a rough trail and a long one. The more I hear about this Sunset deal, the more it looks like we'll be up against a smart and tough hombre."

THE Rio Kid and Celestino left the saloon and wandered around the town. San Antonio was a booming town. The building of the railroad opened up the whole Southwest to a greater degree than ever before. Not only was the town filled with railroad employees on their way to jobs along the tracks, but every saloon, restaurant and hotel had its land and stock speculators. Business men and small merchants came here from every section of the country, eager to launch new enterprises in Texas, New Mexico or Arizona, along the transcontinental tracks.

Twice the Rio Kid was stopped by eager men who tried to sell him real estate, showing flamboyant maps with streets and buildings plotted where actually only coyotes howled and the wind whispered along the sage and cactus. For several hours the two companions roved the streets, then worked their way back to the railroad station as midnight approached.

The station was dark and a lamp glowed from within the railroad catch, turned so low that it gave little light. The big saloon across the track roared with life. Just beyond the station stretched a row of dark, low warehouses with flat roofs and high parapets. When Rio Kid and Celestino swung out of saddle, Morton Abbott was not around. Somewhere down the tracks a locomotive lazily hissed steam as the fireman built up pressure in the boiler.

The Rio Kid mounted the steps of the coach and found the door locked. Celestino rolled a cigarette, still standing by the horses' heads. The Rio Kid descended and stood beside the young Mexican, looking down the street toward the Sunset offices. There was no sign of Abbott.

Impatiently, the Rio Kid circled the end of the coach and stepped clear onto the next track. Far down its length he saw the dark shape of the locomotive, not moving yet. Light from the nearby saloon fell squarely on the Rio Kid. At the same instant he spun on his heel and took a step back to the coach.

The sound of the rifle and the whisper of the slug by his cheek came at once. Celestino shouted and whirled, his hand slashing down to his holster.

CHAPTER III

Vinegaroon

THE Rio Kid flung himself to one side, twisting around to face the line of dark warehouses. His heavy Colts fairly jumped into his hands. The rifle cracked a second time and the Rio Kid saw the flaming wink of fire from the top of the parapet. The slug struck the steel rails and whined off, high and deadly, into the night. The Rio Kid saw

that Celestino had also located the dry-gulcher and the young Mexican was lunging around the corner of the station to reach the rear of the warehouses.

The Rio Kid smashed a bullet in reply to the killer rifle, then streaked along the track. He was clear of the light now and would show only a shadowy, rushing form, hard to hit. If he could hold the killer's attention until Celestino could cut behind the warehouse, then the man would be trapped.

Once more the Rio Kid's sixes smashed at the parapet, looming closer now. He saw adobe fly like dust as the lead smashed into

Celestino Mireles

the edge of the coping. Someone shouted an alarm from the street but the Rio Kid paid no attention, his narrow eyes centered on the warehouse. He caught a glint of metal as a rifle was lifted.

Instantly he checked and sprang to one side. He slammed a shot at the dark bulk and heard the rifle clatter down the front of the building to the ground. Either the Rio Kid's slug had found its mark or had come too close for the killer's comfort.

The Rio Kid reached the warehouse wall and rushed along its length to the far corner. He heard Celestino's shout, coming dimly from the other side of the building. Colts blasted almost together and then two single shots ripped the night, evenly spaced.

Pryor's lips set in a grim, straight line as he rounded the corner, guns held ready in his fists. He heard the rapid pound of boots and came to a plunging halt, guns leveled on the far corner. A shadowy form came rushing toward him.

"Reach!" the Rio Kid snapped.

The man stopped as if he had been slugged. The shadowy form was too bulky and tall for Celestino. The Rio Kid caught the swift motion of the man's arm as his Colt swung up. Twin sixes blasted in the Rio Kid's fists and the heavy guns bucked back against his palms. The shots slapped and boomed in the narrow space. Through a haze of gunsmoke the Rio Kid saw the man slam backward and down. There was a threshing sound and then all was quiet.

"Celestino!" the Rio Kid called.

"I come, General, eef once I can see again."

Celestino came around the corner, feeling his way. The Rio Kid came to his side and grabbed the Mexican's shoulders. He wheeled him around and saw that Celestino rubbed at streaming eyes.

"Madre de Dios!" Celestino swore angrily. "These adobe she fly so I cannot see. You have get these devil, General?"

"Complete," the Rio Kid said gruffly, to hide his relief that nothing worse had happened to Celestino than that he had been blinded by flying adobe kicked up by the killer's shot.

The Rio Kid shoved his sixes into their holsters and turned to the silent form that lay sprawled on the ground. He struck a match and held it over the man's face. Feet pounded close and a crowd of men came rushing around the corner and into the narrow space. The Rio Kid looked up, recognizing Tim Kelly and Morton Abbott. A man with a star on his shirt pushed through the crowd.

"What's happened here?" Abbott demanded, staring from the body, up at the Rio Kid.

"I think someone wanted my scalp," the Rio Kid said. He struck another match over the coarse, stubbled face and looked at the lawman. "Recognize him?"

"Nope," the man said shortly, "but he's pretty blamed ugly."

The Rio Kid caught the start of surprise as Tim Kelly looked at the dead man. The Irishman glanced up at the Rio Kid, then back at the killer's body.

"Ye've already felt the sting of Malan's wasps, me bucko. This one hung around the

saloons in Vinegaroon, though what he'd be doin' back here in Santone, I wouldn't be knowin'."

Kelly shrugged when he'd had his say, and moved off through the crowd. Celestino had rubbed the last of the adobe dust from his eyes. The Rio Kid told the lawman what had happened, with Celestino putting in a word to sustain the story. Morton Abbott listened, sighed, and shook his head.

"I can't understand this at all," he declared. "But I'll vouch for Captain Pryor, Sheriff, and so will Colonel Pierce. He's told yuh a straight story."

"That's good enough for me." The lawman nodded. "We'll just add another to Boot Hill and forget the whole deal."

"But ain't yuh goin' to find out why he attacked Pryor!" Abbott exclaimed.

"There's such a heap of sidewinders like him," the lawman answered, "how would I get any lead as to why he tried to kill Pryor? He's dead and Pryor's got a whole skin. That's about as far as I can go."

"He's right," the Rio Kid broke in. "Besides, it's about time for our train."

ABBOTT, the Rio Kid and Celestino groped their way down the dark passage and out to the railroad tracks. During the excitement the train had come to the station and coupled on to the passenger coach. Abbott ordered the mouse-colored dun and Celestino's horse loaded into a car. Then he unlocked the coach door and admitted the Rio Kid. Down the line a crowd of men swung up into the open doors of several freight cars, laborers going out to the end-of-track.

The coach had been altered to meet Abbott's needs. At one end were bunks, double-tiered, built against the wall. A few of the plush seats remained but the rest of the coach held stove, desk, shelves and drawers for ledgers and records. A cabinet held food supplies and Abbott kept his whisky in the bottom shelf. He brought out a bottle and glasses, placed them on a small table between two of the coach seats.

"This shootin' worries me," he stated flatly as he poured the drinks. The locomotive bell sounded faintly. "Someone has got a mighty powerful spy system in the Sunset and I don't like it."

"I agree," the Rio Kid said. "That dry-gulcher was waitin' for me. Who knew that Colonel Pierce had hired me?"

"That's what scares me," Abbott tossed down his drink. "So far as I know, just the Colonel, you, Senor Mireles and myself. I haven't talked to anybody. I'm shore the Colonel wouldn't."

"I haven't either," the Rio Kid said, "and I vouch for Celestino. But somebody knew —and had a killer waitin'. Why?"

The train started with a jerk that made Abbott grab for the seat. He caught his balance and bent low to peer out the window. The long, dark warehouse slid by and then a succession of smaller buildings. Abbott sat down and sighed, stretching his long legs out before him.

"I don't know why," he mumbled. "It's all a pattern with the killin's and the stealin' that's gone on before. Pryor, I didn't think much of the Colonel's idea that somebody was behind all this trouble, deliberately tryin' to wreck us. Now, I agree with him."

"Any idea who it could be?" the Rio Kid asked.

"There's always one lead right in front us," Abbott said slowly, "but I'm not so shore it's right. If the Southern Pacific lays more miles of track than we do, they get more land and money. But I'm a Californian and I know some of the men behind the Southern. They're honest men, Pryor."

The Rio Kid shrugged.

"This involves big money. Where there's millions, there's trouble."

"Mebbe." Abbott made a discouraged gesture with his hand. He opened his eyes and his friendly smile came again. "We'd better turn in. It's a long and hot ride to Vinegaroon. In the morning I'll go over what's happened and yuh can get a clear picture of what yuh've got to face."

"I'm beginnin' to see it now," the Rio Kid laughed. "And it don't look a bit clear to me."

The three men turned in, sleeping through the night as the train rattled and swayed toward western Texas. The Rio Kid awoke at the first touch of dawn. Without moving, he could look out the window onto the country through which they passed.

Its character had changed already. Cactus clumps and an occasional stretch of sandy, scrubby country suggested the great empty stretches of dismal land that lay in west Texas. They were approaching the Rio Grande and that always was like coming home to Bob Pryor. He had known that river from childhood.

He heard Celestino stir and swing out of his bunk. And in only a short time the two trail partners had ransacked the cupboard while Abbott stretched and yawned in his bunk. They cooked eggs and bacon on a stove that danced and jiggled to the constant shaking of the coach. After the meal, Abbott filled a pipe and stared out the window.

Soon they got down to business and Abbott reviewed the trouble the Sunset had run into building westward. It was a long list, no one item seemingly connected with another. Wild towns were mentioned in the narrative, towns that had boomed as the railroad built toward them and then died once the rails had passed on westward. The Rio Kid listened, tucking names and incidents away in his memory for future use.

At last Abbott stopped.

"Well, there it is. Can yuh make anything of it?"

"Not yet," the Rio Kid answered frankly. He rubbed his lean, tanned jaw. "But a heap of this trouble centers in the tent saloons and the tinhorns. Some of the warehouse stealin' sort of points back to the tent dives and the gents who run 'em."

"I've noticed that, but yuh'll get nowheres followin' that lead. Yuh run up against a blank wall. Besides, if the Southern Pacific wants to cripple us, they got easier ways."

"Yeah, they'll get their hardcases right in the saloons," the Rio Kid broke in. "They'll hire their guns over a table with a drink between 'em. Clean up the gamblers and renegades and yuh'll be a long way toward beating whoever's fightin' us."

"That," Abbott said with emphatic relief, "is yore job. I'm blamed glad of it. I like to have my skin all in a piece and lead poisonin' never did appeal to me. You clean 'em up, Pryor, and welcome to it."

FOR the rest of the day, the three men patiently passed the time. When dusk descended, the train was definitely in the desert country. Buttes stood out gaunt and threatening against the setting sun. A low line of broken hills appeared to the south, marking a stretch of heat-blasted badlands.

The three men had supper and played cards for a few hours before turning in. Now and then the train stopped to take on water or to pick up more workers at little villages that were no more than a few adobe huts lost in an immensity of space. The Rio Kid wondered how the laborers lived in the freight cars further back, and if Tim Kelly were with them.

He could use men like Kelly. Those Irish were hard drinkers and hard fighters but a man could not want for better allies. Under the right leadership and controlled, the Irishmen would be a powerful weapon against the renegade ring that tried to control Vinegaroon and the Sunset.

The train crept across the high trestle of Eagle Nest Canyon over the Pecos River and a short while later came to a tired halt in a great cluster of tents and warehouses. The Rio Kid followed Morton Abbott out of the coach, but he paused on the rear platform.

His sharp eyes moved over the scene. A row of tents and clapboard buildings formed a crooked street that was filled to bursting with men, wagons and horses. There was a constant roar of voices, teamsters cursing, men shouting. In and out of each saloon men hurried like harassed ants. Wagons locked hubs and traffic was snarled. Somewhere off beyond the tents, out of sight, guns blasted hard and flat, breaking off as suddenly as they started. No one listened or paid the slightest attention.

Abbott had reached the sandy grou e turned and looked back up at the Ri l. He smiled broadly and waved his hand in a wide, sweeping gesture.

"There she is, Captain Pryor. Vinegaroon is waitin' to be tamed. Think yuh can do it?"

The Rio Kid caught a slight sardonic note in Abbott's voice. He gave the crowded, shifting scene another glance, then descended the steps. A pitchman's shrill voice sounded clearly from the entrance of a nearby tent.

"Come on, you buckoes! Buck the tiger! Swing some red-rye and climb right on his back! We match yore chips and pour yore poison. Come on, yuh sports! Let's see the color of yore spine!"

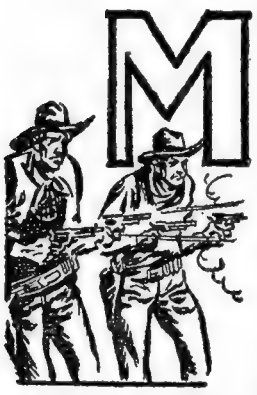
"One of Malan's cheaper places," Abbott said. "He's got saloons to fit every taste."

"Big business, sounds like," the Rio Kid commented.

He followed Morton Abbott down the crowded walk to the first of the big warehouses. Behind them, a swarm of workers had already opened the freight cars and supplies flowed in a steady stream through the wide, black doors of a depot. Tim Kelly's Irishmen had descended from the train in a wave and quickly dispersed in the nearest saloons.

CHAPTER IV

The Judge



MORTON ABBOTT pushed around the corner of the warehouse and opened a small door. The Rio Kid entered behind him into a small but crowded office. A clerk looked up and saw Abbott.

"Lieutenant Campbell and Mr. Garrett are waitin' in yore office," he said.

Abbott nodded and threaded his way around the desks to his own rather spacious cubicle. He opened the door and stepped aside for the Rio Kid to enter. Two men sat comfortably in chairs before the big, bare desk. One of them was tall and lean, with a weathered face that looked gaunt and bony. Clear blue eyes looked out from beneath craggy brows. A drooping mustache covered wide, sober lips. The moment he saw Bob Pryor, his mouth dropped open in surprise.

"Rio Kid!" he explained. "It's been a coon's age since I saw you!"

"Pat Garrett!"

The Rio Kid stepped forward shoving out his hand in genuine pleasure. He noticed that the man wore no badge on his faded, open-throat shirt, but he knew that this gaunt, loose-knit man was famed all over the west as the sheriff who had tracked down and killed Billy the Kid. Except for the heavy gun that hung at one thigh, strapped down, he now resembled an easy-going rancher who was not too ambitious.

"You know Garrett?" Abbott asked the Rio Kid, surprised.

"Worked with him in New Mexico a few years back," the Rio Kid said, and smiled. "Pat Garrett's a man to ride the river with."

Abbott turned to the other man. "Pryor," he said. "Meet Lieutenant Tom Campbell of the Texas Rangers. He's been assigned to Vinegaroon and the country west to El Paso along the railroad. Campbell has kept law and order along the right-of-way."

"Yuh're sayin' a heap," Campbell drawled and shook hands with the Rio Kid. "Me 'n my boys has worked to a frazzle and we ain't even made a dent in this sinful country."

He was a stocky man. He had a barrel chest that tapered down to a narrow waist, and the badge of the Rangers glittered on his gray shirt. He wore a high-peaked Stetson, the wide brim shading a square, tanned face. A strong jaw, rocky chin and high cheekbones gave him an angular, craggy look. His dark eyes were sun-wrinkled at the corners. His smile was open and friendly and the Rio Kid instantly liked him.

Abbott circled the desk and sat down. His glance traveled over the men before him and a slight shadow crept into his eyes. The muscles bunched in his cheeks, then released. He cleared his throat.

"Campbell," he said, "I wanted yuh to meet the Sunset's own private law force. I think yuh can work out some means of cooperation, but from now on Captain Pryor here is in full charge and Pat Garrett will be his second in command. They'll see to it that everybody having anything to do with the Sunset obeys the law. They'll clean up end-of-track towns, workin' with you and yore men, of course."

"Man, I shore appreciate the help," Campbell sighed and dropped into a chair. "It keeps me on the jump to slap the law brand on places like Vinegaroon. How about the warehouse thefts, Abbott?"

"If yuh don't mind," Abbott said, "I think that Pryor can take over that job."

"Mind? I'm blasted glad of it. Pryor, yuh can call on the Texas Rangers any time yuh need 'em."

The Rio Kid nodded.

"I'll do that. Abbott has told me what has happened in Vinegaroon and elsewhere along the Sunet. Both you and Garrett probably know all of the story I know, too. There's no need to take Abbott's time when he's busy somewheres else. S'pose you and Garrett go with me to the hotel and we can work things out there."

"I can take yuh over to see the Judge," Campbell said, "and the bar ain't too far from yore hotel room. Besides, yuh got a heap of railroad work, Abbott. We'll let yuh know what we decide."

Abbott smiled and arose.

"I'll not argue. I'm goin' to leave Vinegaroon tomorrer night, Pryor. Yuh might report to me then."

The Rio Kid said nothing, but got to his feet. Garrett, Campbell and Celestino followed him out of the office. They formed a compact group that fought a passage along the crowded walk, heading in toward the

center of the town. Campbell stopped short and touched the Rio Kid's arm. He pointed toward a tall man on a powerful bay horse who was working his way through the tangled traffic of wagons and riders in the street.

"Yuh'll brush up against that jasper sooner or later," Campbell said. He's Spike Bannion, and I'd feel a heap happier if he was safe behind bars somewhere."

The Rio Kid had only a glimpse of a lean, sardonic face, a tall body that swayed easily in the saddle. The man's shoulders rode at an arrogant angle and the sun gleamed from the handles of matched Colts that were snugged to each leg. Then the traffic swallowed the rider.

"I've heard that name before," the Rio Kid said, after a thoughtful moment.

"Yuh'll hear it a heap more times. He ain't broke no laws that we know about yet, and it plumb riles us. Because we know for shore that with Spike Bannion gone from hereabouts we could rest easy of nights."

CAMPBELL led the way to a two-storied hotel and in a short time the four men pulled up chairs around a rickety table in the room assigned to the Rio Kid and Celestino. The single window opened on a drear expanse of dirty tents, adobe huts and false-fronted stores. Beyond, on a bare stretch of desert floor, stood a cluster of wooden crosses, some of them already askew. Mountains raised sear, brown and broken domes into the heat-blasted sky. Campbell caught the Rio Kid's interest in the crosses.

"Boot Hill," he rumbled. "A man a day, at least, and sometimes a man an hour. Most of 'em out there shore had it comin', but there's others that lived decent, but was cut down."

"By Bannion?" the Rio Kid asked.

"Partly, but we can't prove it."

"Where is the nearest court?" the Rio Kid asked, returned to the bed and sat down on it. Celestino stood near the door while Garrett and Campbell sat beside the little table, chairs tipped back against the wall.

"Del Rio," Campbell answered with a grimace, "and it's a three-day's ride to take a prisoner there. Things can always happen and a man can be ambushed. I got the governor to appoint a justice of the peace here—name of Bean."

"But how about a jail?" the Rio Kid asked. Campbell chuckled and Garrett grinned slightly.

Malan frantically jerked up the dynamite sticks, sobbing in his haste. "Throw it downstream!" the Rio Kid yelled (CHAPTER XVI)

"When Roy Bean hands out justice there ain't no need for a jail, Rio Kid. Yuh can depend on Bean to take care of yore arrests in double-quick order and there won't be no argument."

"I'll see this Bean later." The Rio Kid nodded. "Campbell, I'm goin' to organize a bunch of trouble-shooters on this railroad. We'll have authority only on railroad land and property. That'll cripple us unless we work mighty close with the Rangers, or unless you let us go after these renegades wherever we might find 'em."

Campbell reflectively rubbed his jaw and stared, narrow-eyed out the window.

"I've heard of yuh, Rio Kid," he finally said, "and I know what yuh're like. As a usual thing I'd turn that proposition down flat, for a man could shore rope in a heap of territory and get plumb arrogant. But yuh got my permission to stray sudden and far from the railroad if it's necessary."

"Thanks," the Rio Kid said. "The privilege won't be abused. One more thing. I have an idea that some of these tinhorns and renegades need cleaning out on general principles. Some of these dives could be tore down and nobody would be sorry."

"That's right," Campbell answered. He abruptly looked up at the Rio Kid, a searching, weighing glance. His lips quirked slightly. "I don't rightly know what yuh aim to do, and I don't want to know. I reckon my Rangers could be mighty busy somewheres else."

"That's what I want to know," the Rio Kid laughed. He sobered and turned to Garrett. "Pat, pick up about ten good men yuh can trust. Bring 'em in here. They'll have a job that starts pronto. Campbell, I reckon I'd better see this justice of the peace so that me'n him don't tangle loops none."

Campbell shoved his hat on his head and arose.

"One of my boys has a prisoner over there now on trial," he commented. "Hoss stealin'."

Out on the street, Garrett hurried away to find the ten men the Rio Kid wanted. Campbell led the way to the next corner, then cut away from the main street. He turned down an alley and headed for a rumbling, one-story building.

"That's Bean's saloon," he said. "He holds court in front of the bar. Jury, judge and lawyers have to drink and Roy figgers he might as well profit from the liquor. Don't be surprised at nothin' that happens."

He pushed open a squeaking door that opened into a dark and dirty storage room. Sound from the bar came back like a wave, and a heavy arrogant voice arose high above all the rest:

"Yuh slab-sided sons, hush yore gab! This here court's in session and I aim to have me a respectable silence. Sam, close the bar. This case won't take long."

Campbell grinned over his shoulder at the Rio Kid and walked to the far door. The large barroom was filled with men, some of whom lined the bar three deep. At the far end a ring had formed around a table on which rested a battered lawbook, a six-gun and a bottle of beer. A Texas Ranger stood before the table, with a wolf-faced renegade nervously shuffling his feet beside him.

Behind the table stood a man with a full white beard. His eyes glittered balefully as they swung around the room. His face was round, with hardly a wrinkle. His nose was short and broad. A white shirt, badly soiled, stretched over a rounded paunch. The collar was buttoned up around the thick neck, but the man wore no tie. A ripped vest and nondescript, baggy trousers completed his costume. He had a very close resemblance to Santa Claus, though the set of the head and the full lips were arrogant. This was Roy Bean, newly appointed justice of the peace for the great wild distance west of the Pecos.

HE IMPALED the culprit with a baleful look and jerked a dirty broad thumb toward the man.

"This here the prisoner?" he boomed.

The Ranger nodded and a murmur swept the crowd. Bean rapped angrily on the table with the gun butt and glared until everyone was silent.

"What's he charged with?" he demanded then.

"Hoss stealin'."

"That's blamed serious, accordin' to the code of the glorious state of Texas. Whose hoss?"

"Jed Garver's. I caught him at it."

"Yuh shore he was stealing it?" Bean asked.

"He was headin' it toward the Rio when I caught him. Garver's brand was on it, and Jed was hoppin' mad when I brought this jasper back."

Bean looked again at the prisoner and his eyes narrowed. The man had a bloody band-

age on the right side of his head, covering one ear.

"What's wrong with him?" Bean snapped.

"He got proddy," the Ranger answered, "and tried some gunsmoke. I nicked his ear and took the starch out of him."

"Too bad, yuh're such a blasted poor shot," Bean grunted. "Yuh heard the charges against yuh, hombre, and there ain't no use askin' are yuh guilty. Usual, yuh'd stretch rope." He pointed his finger like a pistol at the cringing outlaw. "Now yuh get out of here. If yuh're ever caught in these parts again, yuh'll be strung up pronto! Get goin', hombre."

The crowd parted and the renegade quickly ran to the door and disappeared. Bean wiped his beard with the back of his hand and glared around at the crowd.

"Yuh heard justice attended to, plumb quick and complete," he said. "Lawin' is always mighty dry work and you citizens ought to help the judge all yuh can. Now who buys a beer for the court?"

There were a dozen offers and Bean closed the court with a single rap of the gun butt on the table. He lumbered back of the bar as the men surged to it. Campbell caught the Rio Kid's puzzled look and the Ranger chuckled.

"That hoss thief will never come back to Vinegaroon, Rio Kid. He knows Bean means exactly what he said, and he knows that Bean has only to say the word to have the man hung."

"I reckon I'm goin' to like this brand of justice," the Rio Kid answered.

"It's the best for Vinegaroon and the towns beyond," Campbell said soberly. "No fuss, no expense, no jail. The renegade got his walkin' papers and won't cause no more trouble here. The rancher got his hoss back. What else is justice?"

They moved to the far end of the bar and Judge Bean caught Campbell's signal over the crowd. The old man emptied his beer bottle with three big gulps and came to meet them. His shrewd eyes carefully weighed the Rio Kid. When Campbell introduced the Rio Kid and his Mexican companion, Bean's shrewd eyes carefully weighed them both. Undeterred, arrogant, Bean was still an excellent judge of character. He shoved out his pudgy hand.

"Yuh'll do, Rio Kid. I've heard of yuh before and I aimed to meet yuh some day."

"Let's get out of the crowd, Roy," Campbell suggested. "Where we can talk."

Bean led the way to a rear room where he generally slept. The bunk was a mare's nest of rumpled blankets. Two unstable chairs sat against the wall and Bean waved his guests to them. He looked hard at Celestino and stroked his beard.

"I like yore looks, senor," he boomed, "but yuh might have some trouble in Vinegaroon."

"Celestino can take care of hisself," the Rio Kid said.

Bean sank onto the bunk. Campbell leaned forward. "The Rio Kid is ramroddin' things for the Sunset, Roy," the Ranger explained. "Any trouble—shootin' it's up to him. He'll have several men working with him. I want yuh to slap the law brand on his prisoners the same way yuh do mine. Vinegaroon's goin' to be cleaned up."

"How yuh aim to do it?" Bean demanded shortly.

"I'm not certain yet," the Rio Kid answered. "I never make plans till I'm shore where I'm goin'. But one thing I do want to know right away is this—is there anybody behind all this trouble the Sunset's been havin'?"

BEAN stroked his whiskers again and Campbell frowned hard at the floor. The Rio Kid waited, watching both men. At last the Ranger raised his head.

"I've had a kind of a suspicion of that," he said, "but no proof. Like I said, a heap of things lead back to Spike Bannion and the man behind him—whoever he is. But that's only the hard-cases trying to run the town wherever they take their tents and saloons."

"Nothing else?" the Rio Kid demanded. "How about the times the warehouses were robbed?"

"Yuh can explain that several ways," Bean said. "There's always gents that wants what the other feller's got. There'd be a heap of money in sellin' that equipment down below the Rio Grande."

"What's yore opinion, Tom?" the Rio Kid swung around to the Ranger.

"I never thought but what Roy was right until now," Campbell answered slowly. "Now I ain't so shore. But I'll say this—if there *is* a gent behind this trouble, organizin' it all and directin' it, his name is Garnet Malan."

"And yuh better keep one eye on that jasper all the time," Bean warned the Rio Kid.

"He don't come out in the open none at all. He has his shootin' and throat-cuttin' done for him. He's a dangerous sidewinder."

CHAPTER V

Bribery

SOMEONE knocked on the door and Bean moved swiftly from the bunk despite his age and size. He jerked open the door and a young man stood framed so that the Rio Kid could plainly see him. He looked a great deal like Roy Bean.

"A gent to see yuh, Pop," the young man said.

"Blazes, Sam! Can't yuh see I'm mighty busy. I ain't got time to see folks now."

"Howdy, Roy," a gruff voice broke in. "Now yuh'd talk to an old friend, wouldn't yuh?"

Bean half-turned to face a man outside the door whom the Rio Kid could not see. The voice was heavy, low and controlled as if a deliberate check-rein held back its harsh brutality. The man came into view in the doorway and the Rio Kid instantly recognized the rider he had seen in the street—"Spike" Bannion.

"Let him in, Bean," the Rio Kid said quietly. Bean stepped to one side and Bannion took a step inside the door. He slouched against the frame, a lean and dangerous man.

His face was oval, the long chin bringing it to a point. Thin, wide lips twisted sardonically and the light hazel eyes seemed half-veiled, glittering beneath the heavy lids. A light scar reached up over the high, broken bridge of the long nose. The vest hung loose, half covering the heavy double gun-belts. His boots were tooled, covered with the desert dust.

Bannion's black brow arched high as he gave the Rio Kid a lazy inspection. Campbell sat tense and frowning while Celestino photographed Spike Bannion in his brain.

"Yuh're the gent I come to see," Bannion said to the Rio Kid carelessly. "Heard yuh'd arrived in town."

"What's on yore mind?" the Rio Kid asked evenly.

Bannion chuckled and shoved his hat back on his thick, black hair. He shook his head.

"Me, I ain't interested. But a friend of mine craves a quiet word or two with yuh. Sent me to see would yuh come around."

"Malan?" Campbell asked sharply. Bannion's face grew subtle cold and angry.

"You ain't in this pow-wow, lawman," he growled. "But if yuh've got to know it's Garnet Malan, right enough. Since yuh're to be the trouble-shooter in these parts, Malan figgers he can help."

The Rio Kid's eyes narrowed.

"Who told yuh what I'm to do?"

"Shucks, yuh needn't try to hide yore trail," Bannion answered lazily. "Just get on yore hunkers and I'll be proud to show yuh to Garnet's place. Yuh know, Garnet could do yuh a heap of good."

"Malan's a crooked renegade," Campbell said angrily.

Bannion didn't seem to move but one of his guns appeared in his hand. And before Campbell could move, the Rio Kid had taken a hand. A steadily held gun was in his own hand.

"Put up the six," he said evenly to Bannion, "and quit showin' off. I'll see Malan."

Bannion's eyes sparked and his face tightened. He glared at the Rio Kid, swallowed, then dropped the six in leather. Campbell's face was black with anger but he managed to choke it down on a slight signal from the Rio Kid. Bannion pulled his length away from the door in sections, it seemed, and slouched outside.

"Some day," he drawled, "yuh'll wonder was I showin' off. Garnet's waiting."

He moved away through the crowd and the Rio Kid checked Campbell's swift move to reach the door.

"Forget it. He was actin' deliberate, Tom. Mebbe I'll get an idea why from Malan. You stick here with Celestino."

"Yuh'll land up in Boot Hill," Judge Bean growled. The Rio Kid shook his head.

"Not this trip. Malan's out for information, not scalps. That'll come later."

Bannion returned to the door and stared hard at the Rio Kid.

"Are yuh comin', hombre?"

"Lead the way, amigo," the Rio Kid answered shortly.

He walked beside Bannion through the saloon to the street. With a brief word, Bannion cut to the left. He walked slightly in advance of the Rio Kid, his long arms swing-

ing, hands brushing his gun butts at each stride. The Rio Kid noticed Bannion's sharp glances at the crowd.

"That gent," the Rio Kid told himself, "has listened a long time to the hoot of the owl and the whisper of the leaves. He never knows when his past will catch up with him."

Bannion led the way toward the railroad, but a scant half block from the rails he abruptly turned into the entrance of an enormous tent. From the size of the crowd there, the Rio Kid began to wonder who was left to work on the railroad. Three long bars had been placed together to form one and a platoon of bartenders worked like beavers to fill orders. A crowd four or five deep lined the bar and constantly struggled to give their money to Garnet Malan in return for cheap liquor.

THE floor was hard-packed earth, sprinkled with sawdust, scuffed and gullied by the constant shift of heavy boots and brogans. Between the bar and the great, long bank of tables was a wide space, jammed now with men.

Waiters scurried from tables to bar, carrying trays loaded with bottles and glasses. From some distant spot an orchestra played, the music only occasionally cutting through the noise. Girls in short, spangled skirts sat at the tables or wandered here and there in search of someone who would buy drinks.

Bannion paid little attention and the Rio Kid noticed that people seemed afraid of him. He had little difficulty in walking to the far end of the tent where another wide entrance gave onto a greater, canvased area. Here roulette wheels spun almost without ceasing. Chuckaluck, dice and monte tables did a landslide business. Everywhere the green-topped poker tables seemed to be filled.

There was less noise here, the sound of voices replaced by the click of chips rapidly changing ownership. The Rio Kid caught a brief glimpse of another entrance to the right where there were rooms for those who liked to celebrate in private.

Bannion crossed the gambling hall and came to a canvas partition. A sharp-eyed gunhawk lounged easily in a chair but he became instantly alert when Bannion approached.

"Garnet alone?" Bannion asked. The gunhawk nodded and gave the Rio Kid a steady, hard stare. Bannion grinned.

"Take a good look at him, Fresno. Yuh might match gunsmoke with him some day. He's to be the new trouble-shooter on the Sunset, I hear."

Fresno stared hard while a wolfish smile lit his pinched face.

"I reckon, from the looks of him," he sneered, "I won't have no trouble."

Bannion moved behind the partition and the Rio Kid followed him. There was a narrow aisle that led to another tent fly. Bannion circled this and the Rio Kid found himself in an office. A flooring had been built here and over this was laid a deep-piled rug. At the far end was a high roll-top desk. A small bar stood to one side and there were chairs here and there about the room. A man swiveled around from the desk.

"Here's yore Rio Kid," Bannion said shortly. "Want I should stick around?"

"No," the man answered. He arose and extended his hand. "Glad to meet yuh, Rio Kid. I'm Garnet Malan."

The Rio Kid briefly shook hands. Malan

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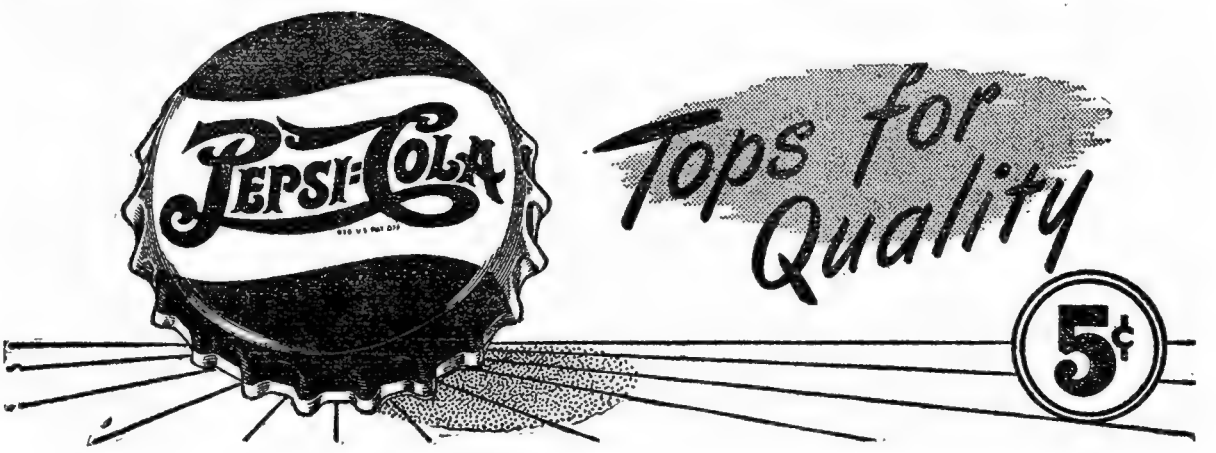


was a small man, slender, with quick, snapping, dark eyes. He covered his shrewd appraisal of the Rio Kid by shoving forward a : and moving to the bar. Bannion ged a moment in the doorway and then disappeared.

Malan handed the Rio Kid a drink and then, with a quick, nervous gesture, seated himself at the desk. He was dressed in a black suit of excellent material, and a light-colored vest was circled by a heavy gold chain. A diamond sparkled from one of his long, tapering fingers.

So far as the Rio Kid could see, the man carried no gun.

His black hair was smoothed down over his head, precisely parted in the middle. It looked heavily oiled as the light was reflected from it. Malan's olive face was pointed, his eyes were a trifle pinched, the lips a touch thin.

Aside from that, he could have been called handsome.

"I'll be frank with you, Rio Kid," Malan said. "Yuh've got a reputation as being a hard man to buck. Ive heard of yuh before but I never hoped for the pleasure of meetin' yuh."

"Nice words," the Rio Kid acknowledged. "But why do yuh think I'll buck yuh?"

Malan laughed and placed his glass on the desk.

"We're both smart men, Rio Kid, and between gents like us there's no need to play games. Neither of us will get anywheres. I know why yuh came to Vinegaroon. Pierce figgers there's just too cussed much trouble along his railroad and yuh're the man who can stop it."

"It's surprising," the Rio Kid answered easily, "how many people in Vinegaroon listen to whispers. Where did yuh get yore information?"

"In my game," Malan answered, "a man has to know things before they happen. No matter who told me, I know about yuh."

"Did you know about a certain gunslingin' renegade in San Antonio?" the Rio Kid asked abruptly. "He was a blamed poor shot with a rifle and six. He's dead."

MALAN stared at the Rio Kid as if he didn't quite understand. His smile vanished, to be replaced by a look of deep concern.

"Yuh mean that someone tried to salivate yuh!"

"Just that. It didn't work."

"I was afraid of somethin' like that," Malan said slowly. "And I ain't surprised yuh're sort of suspicous of me. Naturally, yuh'd think that the moment yuh heard who I am and what I do. But that's why I wanted to talk to yuh."

"I'm listenin', Malan."

"Rio Kid, there ain't no reason why me and yuh should be fightin' one another. I figger we both can go about our business without tanglin' the other's loop. I want to keep my places open and goin' as long as the railroad is bein' built. You want to keep law and order."

"That's the idea," the Rio Kid answered. "But from what I hear, yuh'll have to make some changes if we're not to lock horns."

"I like the way I've built things up." Malan smiled blandly. "And I like the boys around me. I practically control Vinegaroon, Rio Kid, and I only have to say a word to bring peace or war."

"Right now, mebbe that's right, Malan," the Rio Kid conceded.

"It will always be that way." A touch of steel came in Malan's voice. "I can have enough men in less than five minutes to drive every Ranger out of Vinegaroon. Roy Bean holds his court only because he hasn't yet jumped an hombre that's important to me."

"Where are you headin'?" the Rio Kid leaned forward.

Malan smiled and shrugged.

"It's simple, Rio Kid. I've not only got power, but I've got plenty of dinero. I want to see that my dinero is safe. Yuh can help me. I'll see that yuh get three times what the Sunset pays yuh. Of course, I'd figger yuh'd leave my places and my boys strictly alone."

"Under such a deal, I would. Yuh're right shore that I'll make such an agreement with yuh."

Malan chuckled and leaned back in his chair.

"Let's say I ain't alone in this deal. Let's say that if yuh buck me, yuh're buckin' something mighty big. I think yuh're smart, Rio Kid, and I'm makin' yuh the offer."

The Rio Kid arose and looked around the office.

"Nice place yuh got," he commented,

"Best in all Texas," Malan purred, "and this ain't the only spot."

"All bought with money taken from track workers, or at the point of a gun. How

many murders are represented here, Malan? How many good men are in Boot Hill right now so's you could have this office?"

"What do yuh mean!" The smile vanished from Malan's face. His fists clenched and he came to his feet. The Rio Kid turned to meet him.

"Here's yore answer, Malan."

His fist traveled a scant six inches and cracked off Malan's chin. The man crashed back into his desk, grabbed wildly to support himself, and then tangled with the swivel chair. Both man and chair went over in a tangled heap.

A corner of the chair ripped through the canvas wall.

The Rio Kid watched Malan, who cursed, and yelled for Spike Bannion. The Rio Kid whirled as the gunhawk came charging around the tent fly. In a single swift glance, Bannion took in the scene. His hand blurred down to his holsters, fingers whipping around the gun butts. As swiftly, he froze.

The Rio Kid's matched sixes rested firmly in his fists. One gun centered on Spike Bannion, the other on Garnet Malan. The outlaw and his boss became like statues, unmoving, eyes centered on the round black muzzles of the six-guns.

"Lift 'em out, Bannion," the Rio Kid said evenly, "and drop 'em." Bannion carefully complied. His guns dropped to the rug. "Kick 'em out under the tent."

"I'll kill yuh for this," Bannion snarled. The Rio Kid smiled frostily.

"Yuh'll have yore chance, amigo, some other day. Right now, get them Colts out of sight."

Bannion kicked the guns to the far edge of the tent and out under the canvas. He turned, breathing deeply.

The Rio Kid centered his attention on Malan.

"So far, Malan," he said, "I've only got a heap of suspicion and talk about yore places. But yuh can take this warnin'. Run 'em right and run 'em straight. If you got gunhawks in yore pay, get 'em out of Vinegaroon."

"If I don't?" Malan asked in thin anger.

"Yuh'll have more trouble than a dozen men should have. It would be a shame to see this place tore down and the equipment destroyed. But that's what will happen."

"Yuh cussed fool!" Malan gritted. "Makin' threats to me! Yuh ain't got long to live, Rio Kid."

CHAPTER VI

Trouble on the Track

LISTENING to Malan's threat, the Rio Kid's wide lips eased a little. The gambler pulled himself erect and reached for the desk as though to steady himself. The hammer of the Rio Kid's gun clicked loudly and Malan hastily snatched his hand away.

"Get over by Spike," the Rio Kid ordered.

Malan moved to stand beside his gunslammer. The Rio Kid stepped to the desk and jerked out the wide middle drawer. A blue steel Colt caught a gleam of light. He picked it up, keeping Malan and Bannion covered with the second gun.

"It's been a revealin' meetin', Malan," he drawled. "I reckon we both know just where we stand now. And remember—I've given yuh fair warnin'. Stay legal and peaceful or get smashed."

"Stay out of my way," Malan growled defiantly, "or land in Boot Hill."

The Rio Kid picked up a heavy knife off Malan's desk and stepped to the wall. A single sweep of his hand cut a long slit in the canvas. He made the two outlaws and killers a mock salute and stepped through the tent wall. Outside, he whirled and sprinted for the corner of a flimsy building. He heard Bannion's cursing and Malan's shout of alarm.

The Rio Kid reached the corner and rounded it. He plunged into the crowd and slowed his pace. Malan's gunhawks would have a hard time hunting him out in this tide of humans. He headed for Roy Bean's saloon which was not far away.

Campbell and Celestino were there, impatiently awaiting his return. Pat Garrett sat quietly in a chair, looking calmly around when the Rio Kid entered, but Campbell came plunging toward the Rio Kid.

"What did he want?" the Ranger demanded.

"Malan believes in the power of money," the Rio Kid chuckled and sat down on the bed.

Celestino's dark eyes mirrored his relief. "Por Dios, had you not come queeck, amigo,

I would have gone after you."

"I know that," the Rio Kid said simply.

Campbell made an impatient sound. "What did Malan say?" he rumbled.

"He tried to bribe me," the Rio Kid explained, with a wry twist of his lips. "He suggested that if I didn't treat his men and his places nice, that there would a heap of trouble. If I closed my eyes to Malan's activities, the Sunset's pay wouldn't near reach what he'd give me."

"The sidewinder!" Campbell growled.

"Bannion and Malan are pretty mean hombres right now," the Rio Kid laughed. "I knocked Malan down and took Bannion's guns."

"I'm stickin' close then," Pat Garrett spoke up. The Rio Kid made a slight gesture with his hand.

"Thanks, Pat, but Celestino is guard enough. If I need protection, he'll see that I get it—swift and sudden and done in gunsmoke. Did yuh get a line on some men?"

"Three of 'em already," Garrett answered, "and two more who'll be here in a few minutes. I'll have the other five by nightfall."

"Good!" the Rio Kid approved.

The door opened and Roy Bean came in. He ran his fingers uncertainly through his beard and his beady eyes watched the Rio Kid.

"Yuh shore stirred somethin' up, mister," he said at last. "Spike's boys is patrollin' the streets lookin' like they got somethin' caught in their craws."

"Then I've put in a good day's work," said the Rio Kid. "Get Malan mad enough and he'll pull some foolish stunt that'll let us get our hands on him for a stiff jail term. . . . I'm goin' to the hotel. Bring yore boys around after supper, Pat. We'll give 'em their orders then."

"I'm goin' along," Campbell said, as he jammed on his hat. "Just in case. There's too many owlhoot guns roamin' the street right now to suit me."

When Celestino, Campbell and the Rio Kid left Bean's saloon, the Ranger constantly watched the shifting crowd, ready for trouble and expecting it at any moment. But if Bannion's gunhawks were on the prowl, they were not along the street that led to the Rio Kid's hotel. The little group reached his room without incident and Campbell heaved a deep, heart-felt sigh.

"I'd not have given a plugged peso for yore life the last five minutes," he said. "Yuh got to be more careful in this town, Rio Kid."

"I can't get anythin' done by hidin' in rooms and saloons," the Rio Kid replied. "Besides, if a trace of fear is shown to Bannion or his gunslammers, they'll be mighty eager for gunsmoke in a hurry."

"I reckon yuh're right," Campbell sighed. "Anything else we can talk over?"

"Nothing now," the Rio Kid smiled and extended his hand. "It'll be a pleasure to have yuh around, Tom. I know I can depend on you and yore Rangers."

CAMPBELL shook hands and left. The Rio Kid stretched out on the bed while Celestino stood by the window, looking out on the distant Boot Hill. The sounds of the town came through the flimsy walls. Out by the tracks a locomotive bell rang monotonously. The Rio Kid placed his hands under his head and stared up at the spotted and stained ceiling.

"Malan backed up the colonel's suspicions," he said abruptly. The young Mexican turned his head.

"There is then the hombre behind Senor Malan?"

"Yuh can bet yore last silver concho there is. Malan hinted at it, and Malan's been too blamed bold up to now to be playin' a lone hand. He figgers that if things get too tight, he can always get some mighty powerful help."

"Maybe someone from these Southern Pacific?" Celestino suggested. The Rio Kid frowned.

"Nope. Can't believe that. But yuh can't be shore it ain't somebody mixed up with the Southern Pacific outfit someways. Amigo, we're goin' to have some mighty hard diggin' before we pull that snake into the daylight. But he's there, and that's somethin' we wasn't shore of till Malan tried to use his dinero to buy us off."

Steps sounded loud in the hall and someone knocked on the door. The Rio Kid swung his legs off the bed, but Celestino had already crossed the room, a heavy Colt ready in his hand. He cautiously opened the door, then stood back and admitted Morton Abbott. The big man saw the gun in Celestino's hand and his eyes opened wide. He looked sharply at the Rio Kid.

"Yuh've had trouble," he stated flatly.

"Not bad." The Rio Kid smiled slightly. "Bannion and Garnet Malan took chips but nothin's happened."

PAT GARRETT
(1849-1908)

PAT GARRETT was little known in the West until he accepted the law badge. Then, with cool courage, he went after the cold-blooded killer, Billy the Kid, and got his man where many another had failed and died under the Kid's guns.

Garrett had been a buffalo hunter, a lucrative trade, for a time, until because of reckless, wholesale hunting, the buffalo were soon decimated, becoming so few that it no longer paid to hunt them. Pat Garrett left the game then, and drifted around the West, working as a cowboy. His trail took him into New Mexico where he met Billy the Kid, the first time on a basis of friendship. Their ways soon parted, however, not to meet again until 1880.

In that year the Kid's gang had so terrorized the country with murder and robbery that the citizens of Lincoln County looked around for someone on whose courage they could depend to deal with the desperado. So they elected the lanky, quiet cowboy, Pat Garrett, as sheriff. He accepted the star with the realization that his real job was the capture or death of Billy the Kid. Without delay he went after the outlaw, and soon had him cornered, but Billy the Kid escaped. Patiently, Pat Garrett kept on the trail, and finally he was able to force the outlaw to surrender. Pat brought the elusive desperado to Lincoln for trial, but Billy the Kid killed a jailer and escaped again, shooting up the town as he went.

Again Pat Garrett started on the manhunt. This time, he caught Billy the Kid in a dark room—and he didn't wait for any judge or jury to deal with him. His bullet smashed the life from the kill-crazy outlaw.

That was the high point in Pat Garrett's career. In 1901 Theodore Roosevelt appointed Garrett as customs collector at El Paso. Later, when Garrett brought a saloon-keeper friend to a convention of Rough Riders it was not looked upon too well, though Garrett himself, who had become a heavy drinker, was highly indignant. As a consequence, his appointment was not renewed and Pat drifted into complete obscurity.

Morton shook his head.

"I wouldn't have yore job at any salary. I've got to get back to San Antonio. The train will pick up my coach in a few minutes. Anything I can do before I go?"

"Nothin'," the Rio Kid answered. "How about Saber, and Celestino's hoss? Where'd yuh have 'em put?"

"In the Vinegaroon Livery," Abbott answered. "What did you and Campbell decide?"

"We'll work together. Garrett is roundin' up some men he can trust to do what I want 'em to. After that, we'll make our plans accordin' to the way things break. Right now, that's all we can do."

"I reckon it is," Abbott sighed. He brightened and shoved out his hand. "Well, Captain Pryor, keep me informed, and call on me for anything yuh need. At least I can take care of that job."

Abbott left and Celestino bolted the door behind him. The young Mexican turned back to the window and the Rio Kid stretched out

on the bed again.

For a long time the two men were silent. The Rio Kid checked over the factors in the problem and the men he had to work with. Garrett was practically tailored for his job, a fearless, unimaginative man whose guns would do a great deal to bring the law to Vinegaroon on the side of the Sunset Railroad. Campbell might not be the gun expert that Pat Garrett was, but the Ranger lieutenant thoroughly understood his job and had plenty of savvy.

The thought of Roy Bean caused the Rio Kid to smile slightly. Unlettered, brusque and rude, the bewhiskered judge dealt out a homely justice that would be quick and effective.

The Rio Kid's thoughts had drifted on to Tim Kelly when abruptly he swung off the bed at a new thought. Celestino was instantly alert. With just a word, the Rio Kid unbolted the door and walked down to the lobby, Celestino at his side. The clerk behind the desk had a ready answer for the Rio Kid's question.

"Yuh're lookin' for Jack Edwards. He has most of them Irish hardcases on his payroll. Edward's warehouse is right down the street next to the railroad tracks."

The Rio Kid and Celestino left the hotel. They threaded their way through the crowd to the railroad, stopping at the Vinegaroon Livery to check over their horses before they continued to the warehouses beyond. Making inquiries, they finally came to a low, rambling building with a cubicle office in one corner. The warehouse doors stood wide, showing the big room to be almost empty of equipment. The Rio Kid gave it only a glance as he passed, and pushed open the office door.

A young man looked up from a scarred and battered desk. A lock of lank, black hair hung down toward one eye, giving him a harassed and worried air. He had a pleasant face, though the cheeks seemed sunken. He brushed the hair back from his tanned forehead, blue eyes sweeping swiftly over the Rio Kid and Celestino.

"Yes?" he asked.

"Jack Edwards?" the Rio Kid asked and went on when the young man nodded, "I'm looking for a little Irishman named Tim Kelly. Does he work for you?"

"What's Tim done now?" Edwards asked sharply.

"Nothin'. I'd like to borrow his time for a while. I'm Bob Pryor, sometimes called the Rio Kid."

"Rio Kid!" Edwards broke in.

HE QUICKLY circled the desk. He was fairly tall and muscular, with broad shoulders and long legs. He wore a gun-belt, the holster tied down against the thigh. Whipcord breeches ended in high, scarred boots.

"I was just wondering how I could find you," he told the Rio Kid. "There's been trouble with my graders down the line and I heard yuh'd been hired to keep order on the Sunset."

"Everyone in Vinegaroon knows that," the Rio Kid said irritably, "and I haven't been here a full day yet."

"Oh, the word got around by way of the grapevine," Edwards explained, then brushed it aside. "But that's not important. What is, is that right now trouble has tied up my crew out at the end-of-track."

"What kind of trouble?"

"I don't know exactly. I just got word." Edward's face darkened and his fists doubled. "But I'll bet either Garnet Malan or Spike Bannion are behind it somewheres. So far they've been smart enough to stay in the background."

"Yuh talk like there's been trouble before," said the Rio Kid.

Edwards sighed and sat down behind the desk.

"Plenty of it," he said shortly. "It's shore high time somebody like you took ahold of the Sunset, Rio Kid. I've lost a dozen good men to Malan one way or the other. Them gunhawks of his have either put 'em in Boot Hill or run 'em off. They've caused trouble among my own men, leadin' to quarrels and plenty of fist fights. And yuh can't grade railroads while you're fighting."

"Is it planned deliberate?" the Rio Kid asked.

Edwards nodded emphatically. "It's deliberate, all right." He flushed, grinned, and then the scowl returned. "Yuh see, Garnet Malan and I are wantin' to marry the same girl. She's Molly Fair, who runs the café just around the corner. She won't have anything to do with Malan, though he keeps tryin' to force hisself on her. Well, Malan's tryin' to put me clear out of the runnin' for keeps."

"By breakin' up yore work crews," the Rio Kid said, and nodded

Edwards leaned forward, his fist thumping on the desk.

"I can't stand it much longer. I made a contract with the Sunset and I made it pretty low. This is my first big job and I was out more to establish my business and engineerin' reputation than to make money. Each day's delay brings me that much closer to a loss. Malan knows that and he knows I haven't got much money."

The Rio Kid's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Edwards, Malan wants to run yuh out all right, but you're not the main problem. He wants to cripple the Sunset above everything else. I'm not shore why, yet. If he can break you and have a free field with this Molly Fair, that's just an extra inducement for his dirty work."

"Break the Sunset!" Edwards sat back with a thud. He scowled at the desk. "I never thought of it that way, but yuh're right. The Sunset can't build until I've got the rail bed graded."

"How about Tim Kelly?" the Rio Kid suggested.

"I sent him out by the last train to see about the trouble. I'm goin' out by the first train tomorrow. Can yuh go along? If it's Malan's gunhawks, yuh'll shore be needed."

"I'll go along," the Rio Kid agreed. "But s'pose we leave tonight? We'll get there before mornin', hours before anybody expects us."

Edwards' eyes lighted.

"I'll be ready to ride in an hour."

"Not that soon. I'm fixin' up some headaches for Malan here in Vinegaroon. Be ready about nine. My friends and I will meet yuh here. In the meantime get ready to loan me Tim Kelly."

"Why do you want Kelly?" Edwards asked, walking to the door with the Rio Kid.

"Irish headaches," the Rio Kid chuckled, "are the worst kind. They're especially bad for tinhorns and renegades."

Edwards laughed uproariously.

"Nobody knows that more than I do," he said with a wink. "You can trust an Irishman to finish what he starts. What I want to know is what you mean to have them start."

A glint sprang into the Rio Kid's eyes.

"What you don't know won't hurt you," he said mysteriously. "It's Tim Kelly who will do the job. And I promise you that Malan will be on the paying end."

"That suits me fine," Edwards said.

CHAPTER VII

End-of-Track

PAT GARRETT brought his men to the Rio Kid's room just at dusk. They came in, and lined the walls, silent men, each wearing a gun-belt. The Rio Kid shrewdly judged them and liked what he saw. Pat Garrett closed the door behind him and waved his hand in a circle around the room.

"Here's yore fighters, Rio Kid. Yuh can depend on every man-jack of 'em."

"Have yuh told 'em what the job's to be?" the Rio Kid asked.

Pat nodded. The Rio Kid sternly searched each face. Garrett's fighters met his look squarely.

"Then you gents know this won't be a picnic," he said at last. "Listen to the noise comin' in that window."

A silence fell on the room and instantly the constant roar of sound from the street thundered in on them. Pitchmen cried shrilly before the tents. With startling suddenness a gun fight started nearby, and ended as swiftly as it had begun. The Rio Kid's jaw jaw tightened.

"That's what we're cleanin' up. We're cleanin' it up and tamin' this town no matter whose toes we step on. I hope all of yuh savvy that. If yuh got friends who are on the wrong side of the law, now's the time to walk out of that door."

Not a man moved. They watched the Rio Kid with quiet intentness. One of them cleared his throat and shuffled his feet when every pair of eyes centered on him.

"My brother was killed not far from here," he finally managed to say. "He caught a tinhorn double-dealin' and called the hand. He got his dinero back, but somebody knifed him."

"Malan's place?" the Rio Kid asked quietly.

"Not his big place, but one of his smaller clip houses," the man replied.

"It's men like Malan we're after," the Rio Kid said, as he shifted his holsters and watched the men. "Malan and his kind have gathered gunslingers from the whole

and from below the Rio to protect 'em. There'll probably be gunplay, plenty of it. If yuh want to back out, do it now."

He paused another moment but no one moved. The grim look left his face and his wide lips broke in a pleased smile.

"Yuh looked like men to ride the river with," he declared. "But I had to be shore. . . . All right, from this minute on, yuh're listed with the Sunset. Yuh're trouble-shooters. Pat'll give yore names to the Rangers and yuh'll take yore orders direct from Pat. If yuh need guns, rifles or ammunition, same'll be issued in the morning."

"What do we do?" one man asked as a small silence fell.

"I'm leavin' Vinegaroon and will be back tomorrow or the next day," said the Rio Kid. "So far, nobody knows yuh're workin' with me or for the Sunset. Scatter out tonight and visit every dive and saloon in Vinegaroon. I want to know which ones should be closed up. I'll ask for yore reports when I get back. That's all, men, and yuh've got yore first job. More'll come, don't worry. And in the meantime—if yore gun draw's slow, get the kinks out of it pronto."

When the men had gone, the Rio Kid, Pat and Celestino left the hotel. They stopped at the livery, saddled their horses, and rode on to Edwards' warehouse. It was dark, but they could see the young contractor waiting for them in the shadow of the big doors. The Rio Kid introduced Edwards to Pat Garrett and the four men swung into the pushing crowd that jammed the main street of Vinegaroon.

In a comparatively short time they had worked their way free of the town, though they could still hear the roar of it. Gradually its lurid lights faded and the four settled down to a steady, mile-eating pace. Pat Garrett jerked off his hat so that the desert breeze could touch his face. He breathed deeply.

"Shore feels good to smell clean air again," he said gratefully. "Even the air in that blasted sink-hole back there smells of snake, Rio Kid."

"It'll smell the same ahead, when we get there," Edwards said grimly.

The hours passed slowly. It was pleasant, the Rio Kid thought, to be riding Saber in the free air, with the wild town behind them. He whistled a tune and the dun's ears swiveled around to catch the melody. The animal pranced a little, for Saber knew that tune, had heard it often in battle. He showed that by lifting his hoofs high, for a time, then once more settled to the steady pace. Of the "breed that never dies", Saber had carried his rider over many a weary mile and through many a situation where speed and flashing action had made all the difference between life and death. The dun had proved his worth, in war and in civil life.

ABOUT midnight, the four riders stopped and dismounted. They lit cigarettes, taking a short rest that refreshed both man and beast. In fifteen minutes they were back in the saddle again. They paralleled the railroad, heading steadily westward. The Texas moon rode high, lighting the whole desert plain with silver so that they saw the dark blob of the tents and cars of the end-of-track long before they reached them.

They slowed their pace as they reached the first of the tents. A line of railroad cars sat to one side, barracks on wheels for the workers. Not far ahead, the rails came to an abrupt end through the raised road-bed that stretched on into the darkness. Cars and tents were dark.

A man stepped from behind a wagon, gun in hand.

"All right, gents, light and let me see yore faces."

The Rio Kid dismounted with the rest. The guard peered up into Edwards' face, grunted and slid his six-shooter back into the holster.

"Mighty late for yuh to be ridin', Mr. Edwards," he growled.

"I'm goin' on to my crew. Things seem peaceful enough here."

"Yep, but heard yore boys kicked up a rumpus. Tim Kelly's up ahead and I reckon by now he's got the hump out of their backs."

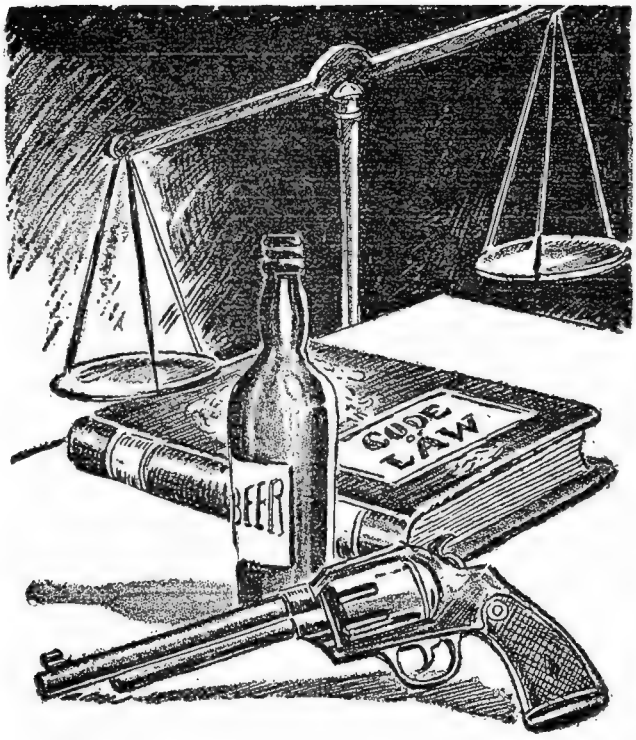
"He'll try," Edwards said, and swung back into saddle.

They rode through the camp, the hoofs of their mounts making little sound on the soft sand. Clear of the camp, they urged their horses to greater speed. Edwards turned to the Rio Kid who rode close beside him.

"My boys keep ahead of the main gang," he explained. "They have to, to get the bed in shape for the ties and rails. Pro'bly saves a heap of trouble too."

The Rio Kid nodded but said nothing.

Time passed and the miles dropped back behind them. Then, once more they saw the dark blob ahead that marked another camp, smaller than the main one.



JUDGE ROY BEAN

ROY BEAN was born along the Ohio River in Mason County, Kentucky, between 1825 and 1830. Little is known of his sturdy, pioneer parents, but all of the Bean boys left more or less of a mark on history. Joshua, the oldest brother, went to California about 1849. He became the first mayor of San Diego and a major general in the State Militia. He was murdered in 1852.

Sam, the brother who was born in 1819, was the only one of the three whose birth year is actually known. Like Josh, he became a wanderer, heading for the West. He became the first sheriff of Don Ana County, New Mexico, when it reached nearly to the Pacific Ocean.

Finally young Roy Bean also wandered West and he soon became quite a figure in San Diego, backed by the power and prestige of his older brother, Josh. But that ended in a shooting scrape that forced Roy to flee to Los Angeles. He established a saloon there, but lost everything and wandered on to Old Mesilla in New Mexico, where his brother Sam helped him along.

During the time that the Civil War made itself felt in the Far West, Roy was active. But on the collapse of the Confederate cause, he again found himself without money and without friends. He wandered on to San Antonio.

There he became a town character and a rather unprepossessing part of the town was named Beansville after him. He ruled the district like a little king. He was married to a Mexican woman and had four children—Zulema, Little Roy, Sam and Laura. But at last, unable to live with his wife, Roy moved to the railroad boom town of Vinegaroon.

Because Vinegaroon, with its lawless element was so great a distance from the regular courts, the governor of Texas, on recommendation of the Texas Rangers, appointed Roy a justice of the peace in the town. He helped make Vinegaroon a fine town in which to live, and when the railroad builders moved on, so did he—to a spot close to the Pecos River Canyon where a town was being built. At Bean's insistence the town was named Langtry, after the famous actress, Lily Langtry, with whose photograph old Judge Bean had fallen in love. His saloon, the Jersey Lily, became a famous landmark for tourists. Bean held his justiceship with intense pride and called himself "the law west of the Pecos."

When Judge Roy Bean died March 16, 1903, at the Jersey Lily, he had become a national figure, and since his death has grown into an American legend. Many tales are told of the strange decisions of this old man whose fame came late in life, but which is unbreakably linked with the history of the great West.

"That's it," Edwards said. "Looks peaceful from here."

The Rio Kid gave the camp a single sweeping glance, then his eyes shifted to the south as he caught a glimpse of a moving shadow. At first, he could not make out what it was, then suddenly he realized that it was a large cavvy of horses, heading toward the distant Rio Grande. He spoke a quiet word to Edwards and pointed toward the moving mass.

Edwards took a single look, then sent his mount ahead at top speed.

"Our animals!" he yelled. "They're bein' run off!"

The Rio Kid, Celestino and Pat Garrett instantly streaked after Edwards. Saber soon passed the man, the dun's hoofs thundering a staccato beat. The Rio Kid bent low over Saber's neck and the horse herd loomed closer. Two riders detached themselves from the cavvy, swinging back to cover their horse thief companions.

The Rio Kid's hand swept down to his holsters and both sixes blurred out of leather. A Colt blasted as one of the outlaws fired. The slug sang close to the Rio Kid's ear. He heard alarmed shouts as the owlhooters tried to speed up the stolen horses. Two more men dropped back to side their comrades.

There was still some distance between them and the Rio Kid. Celestino urged his own horse to greater speed but he could not catch up with Saber. Pat and Edwards galloped at either side of Celestino. The four horse thieves were milling about, not certain yet how to spread to meet the attack.

They had no chance. For even as they hesitated Saber hit them like a tornado. He downed one horse in a threshing tangle of legs. The Rio Kid's sixes exploded. A man slammed out of the saddle and fell in a sprawled, silent heap, dead before he hit the ground.

Saber reared, hoofs striking. The Rio Kid jerked the horse down but Saber's teeth tore at another horse's flank, the animal squealed in pain and bolted, the rider vainly sawing on the reins.

The fourth man triggered a hurried shot that whined harmlessly into the air. He neck-reined his horse and spurred desperately. Three jumps later, the Rio Kid's slug caught him and he tumbled out of saddle.

Jack Edwards came racing up, followed by Pat Garrett. Celestino had cut wide to swing around the rear of the stolen horses so that he could cut down the outlaws who herded them along.

The Rio Kid swung Saber around and the fighting dun sped straight for the herd. The horse thieves scattered, each man riding hard to save his own life. The herd, frightened by the thundering gunfire, stampeded directly south. The Rio Kid arose in the stirrups and swept his Stetson from his head. He swung it toward the herd in a signal to his friend to check the stampede. Then he settled grimly in saddle while Saber streaked after the fleeing gunslammers.

The Rio Kid knew that most of them would escape but he was determined to capture one alive. If the man could be made to talk, maybe Bannion or Malan would be implicated in the attempted theft.

Ahead, the outlaws drew further apart and the Rio Kid swerved Saber to ride down a man on a rangy, powerful mount. The ground blurred by under Saber's hoofs. The Rio Kid's narrowed eyes centered on the man he chased, who clung close to his hore's neck, offering no target at all unless the Rio Kid downed the mount.

FOR a time, it seemed the outlaw would keep his lead but at last Saber's greater stamina began to close the gap. The owlhoot threw a hasty look back over his shoulder, and instantly realized that he could not out-distance the grim-faced man on the racing dun.

The fleeing man snapped erect. He brought his horse to a plunging halt, whirled it around, intending to hurl the animal into Saber. If he could throw the Rio Kid and his mount, then he would have a good chance to escape.

He whipped out his Colt even as he whirled his horse, sank the spurs and catapulted directly at Saber. The dun moved with lightning speed, swerving to one side. As the Rio Kid loomed up on him, the renegade fired. The blast of the shot deafened the Rio Kid and he felt the heat and burn of the flash. The Rio Kid looked directly in the strained, stubbled face of the renegade and then Saber had flashed by.

Instantly the dun whirled and came charging down as the renegade tried to twist around, bringing his Colt down in a chopping shot. The Rio Kid fired. The renegade spilled from the saddle in a rolling fall. His mount sped on across the desert, stirrups flying. The outlaw lay sprawled for a moment, then rolled over and tried to sit up. He collapsed, grabbing his shoulder, face twisted with pain.

Saber came to a plunging halt and the Rio Kid vaulted from saddle. He ran to the downed man, both guns lined down on him.

"Don't shoot," the man called in a coarse, choked voice. "Yuh hold aces and I'm tossin' in the cards. My shoulder's plumb broke."

"On yore feet," the Rio Kid snapped, "pronto."

The man cursed again and sat up painfully. He struggled to his feet, the cold sweat standing out on his low forehead. At last he stood unsteadily before the Rio Kid, still holding his shoulder, the blood oozing from between his fingers.

The Rio Kid's eye swept over him for sign of a hideout gun. The man's holster was empty, the weapon lying on the sand several feet away.

The moonlight disclosed a stocky figure, uncertainly supported by bowed legs, encased in high-heeled boots. The man's black coarse hair grew low on his forehead. He had beetling brows and thick lips, now pressed tightly against the pain. Garrett came streaking up and stared down from the saddle at the renegade.

"Looks like yuh caught yoreself a skunk, Rio Kid," Garrett said.

"Take a look at his shoulder, Pat," the Rio Kid said, "while I keep a six lined on his brisket."

CHAPTER VIII

First Grist for the Law Mill

GARRETT stepped out of his saddle and examined the wounded man. The shoulder was not broken but the fellow had lost a good deal of blood from the bullet. Garrett bound up the man's wound, using his neckerchief.

"What's yore handle?" the Rio Kid asked when Garrett finished.

"Gart Stamper," the man growled. His eyes gleamed wickedly. "Yuh won't hold me for long, hombre. I got friends."

"Hoss stealin'," the Rio Kid said slowly, "generally gets a man strung up to the nearest tree or post. Yuh might not live long enough for yore friends to find yuh."

That took some of the bravado out of the man. He shuffled his feet and fidgeted nervously, glancing from Garrett to the Rio Kid. When he spoke again, there was a whine in his voice.

"Yuh wouldn't do that to me, gents. I ain't harmed nobody, and we wasn't stealin' them hosses anyhow."

"It was blamed good practise then," Garrett cut in gruffly. "Just exercisin' 'em, I reckon?"

We was havin' a joke on the boys back at the camp," the man said lamely. He met the steady, disbelieving, hard stares of his two captors and his eyes dropped. He shivered a little, though the night was warm.

"Hold him here, Pat," the Rio Kid said quietly. "I'll be back after I help Celestino and Jack Edwards. Stamper, as yuh call yoreself, yuh might start thinkin' how blamed fast a man can be hung out in these parts. Mebbe yuh'll decide a little truth might go a long way."

The Rio Kid holstered his sixes and turned on his heel. Stamper called to him and the Rio Kid turned.

"Yuh'll just have another lie ready, Stamper, if yuh say anything now. Think it over first. I'll talk to yuh when I get back."

"He ain't one to waste time," the Rio Kid heard Garrett say as he walked away. "Right now he knows yuh'll lie, Stamper. Once yuh think a while, you'll likely tell the truth pronto, or he'll string yuh up pronto. Set down and start thinkin', hombre. Mebbe yuh can save that dirty neck of yores."

The Rio Kid swung into saddle and sent Saber at an easy lope toward the distant horse cavvy. Edwards and Celestino had managed to round up most of the horses, though some of them would probably run until they reached the Rio Grande. Jack Edwards swore in cold, deadly fury, his voice level, though it trembled now and then.

"Them cussed sidewinders, them low-down snakes! They was stealing every work hoss I had! I couldn't grade a yard of dirt without these animals, and they knew it!"

"We got one of the hoss-stealin' lobos," the Rio Kid told him.

Edwards twisted around in the saddle. "Then I'm shootin' him the minute I see him!" he shouted angrily. "Hoss stealin'! Cripplin' me so's I'll go broke on the job! Stopping work on the Sunset for days!"

"Forget the shootin," the Rio Kid said calmly. "We'll get more out of this jasper alive and talking than dead. I aim to find out who's behind him."

"Garnet Malan!" Edwards cried sullenly. "Who else?"

"It looks like it," the Rio Kid answered, "but we haven't got proof. Our prisoner can give that to us if he'll talk. We'd better head these hosses into camp and see what happened there. Seems like there'd ought to

have been some kind of alarm."

Edwards was still growling in his throat as the three men lined their horses northward, where they picked up Pat Garrett and his prisoner. Edwards glowered at the man as he painfully pulled himself aboard one of the work horses. A lariat forming a hackamore around the animal's muzzle and then dallied around the Rio Kid's saddle-horn made certain that Stamper would not escape.

The man looked really frightened now. The Rio Kid said nothing and his companions attended strictly to the business of chousing the horses along.

As they approached the camp, the Rio Kid saw that abruptly the place had come to life. Lights glowed and lanterns bobbed and winked as men carried them here and there. Edwards cut away from the herd and rode ahead. The Rio Kid, Celestino and Pat turned the horses into a stout corral, a hundred yards from the camp.

Edwards came riding up.

"They found the hoss wrangler," he told them soberly. "He was knifed. Died without makin' a sound."

"Murder," the Rio Kid said quietly, looking hard at Stamper.

"I didn't do it!" Stamper babbled. "I never touched him!"

The Rio Kid smiled coldly. "That remains to be seen. Any way yuh take it, yuh're at the frazzled end of a rotten rope, Stamper. We'll tend to yuh later. . . . Come on, Edwards, let's see what yore men have got to say."

SILENTLY the Rio Kid watched as Edwards talked to his foremen. They were a powerful, rough lot with thick muscular arms and granite jaws, fit men to control other men who fought heat, dust and time to build the road-bed for the rails swiftly coming behind them. The Rio Kid felt more certain than ever that these men would be useful once their natural destructive energy could be directed toward enforcing law and order.

At last Tim Kelly came in. The wiry little Irishman saw the Rio Kid and his sandy brows raised in high arches.

"So work for the railroad ye did!" he exclaimed, then shook his head. "Shure, ye wouldn't have told me ye'd be a bossman."

"You wouldn't have talked to me so free-like, if I had," the Rio Kid said, and grinned.

Tim scratched his head hard, scowling. Then he grinned and shrugged.

"That ye'd be knowin'," he admitted. "No hard feelin's, me bucko, and the joke's on Tim Kelly."

He turned to Edwards and the smile vanished. He became businesslike.

"Most of the horses are back and there ain't one but what can pull a grader without harm," he said. "Ye were lucky there, me bhoy. Finegan's knifed and dead, though."

"What about the trouble up here?" Edwards asked.

"Shure, would ye believe a tinhorn walked all the way out here last week for a game of cards! So he said, but I'm thinkin' there was someone saw he did not take too many steps. Be that as it may, he arrives here with a carpetbag of rotgut and more blarney than I have meself."

"What happened?" Edwards asked impatiently.

"Now what would happen?" Tim said. "Shure, he dealt the cards everyway but straight and the boys began diggin' down deep for their last dollar. Some wanderin' gents came ridin' by and stopped in to visit. Friends of the tinhorn, I hear. Shure, and the poker was so important that the gradin' slacked down. The rotgut was plain pizen and some of the boys got sick. Then O'Toole caught the tinhorn dealin' from the bottom."

"I can guess the rest," the Rio Kid said quietly. "No Irishman stands by and lets hisself be cheated."

"That is gospel true," Tim said fervently. "Shure, and the fists started swingin'. There was also some gunplay from the gents that was riding by. Nobody hurt seriously, but two of our foremen are in bed with bullet-holes in 'em. They'll mend, right enough, but there's time that's wastin' away what with the rails creepin' closer each hour."

Jack's fist doubled up on his lap.

"Did yuh straighten up the mess?" he demanded.

"There wasn't much to be done when I got here," Tim told him, and grinned at the Rio Kid. "Shure and ye wouldn't be thinkin' the tinhorn and the hardcases could stand against Irish fists! They'd skeedaddled hours before."

Jack Edwards scowled at the far wall. "It's all part of a scheme—the fightin' and the hoss stealin'," he said grimly. "Say, Tim, how come there was only one man guardin' the cavvy?"

"Now who," Tim demanded reasonably, "would expect spalpeens so bold as to take

the horses right from under us? Besides, the guard was to patrol the camp and supply dumps, looking at the horses only now and then."

Edwards shrugged and accepted the explanation silently. He caught the eye of his foreman and dismissed him and the rest of the men with a brief word to be more careful in the future.

"It might be a good idea," he said in parting, "to keep all strangers out of camp. That way, yuh won't run into none of the trouble-makers Spike Bannion sends around."

Tim started to leave but the Rio Kid checked him. Kelly waited, pulling a clay pipe from his pocket and lighting it. When the last of Edwards' men were gone, the Rio Kid turned to Tim.

"Yuh've been trouble-shootin' for Jack for some time, I hear," he said. "Would yuh like to take on some more trouble?"

"And what would it be?" Tim asked, narrowly watching the Rio Kid through a haze of thick, blue smoke.

"I'd like to use yuh in Vinegaroon, Tim. How many Irishmen in that town would take yore orders? How many are spoilin' for a bit of excitement now and then?"

"I could have me a hundred at the wave of me hand," Tim said expansively. "Maybe more if they was needed."

"Could yuh depend on that, Tim?" the Rio Kid prodded. "Would they take yore orders without question?"

THE wiry little Irishman cocked his head to one side and gravely studied the Rio Kid's strong face. He grinned crookedly.

"That they would."

The Rio Kid nodded and smiled. He turned to Edwards.

"I want to borrow Tim Kelly and put him on the Sunset payroll. If Tim can do as he says, we'll put the fear of the devil into Garnet Malan and some of his boys. I want a hundred or more good men, Tim, who can tear down a buildin' in fifteen minutes if they're ordered to. I want fighters, boys who can handle their fists and a good club or a pick handle."

"Guns?" Tim asked, eyes shining.

"Not guns. My own boys will handle the gunsmoke end of it. Can yuh get yore Irishmen together in short order?"

"Once I'm back in Vinegaroon, give me three days," Tim said firmly. "Ye'll have 'em. Shure, and it would look that ye'd be fightin' Malan with his own methods. Whsst! But the money he'd lose if me boys worked on one of his saloons!"

"Yuh've got the idea, Tim. How about it, Edwards?"

The young man scratched his head, hesitant to let so valuable a man go. But at last he gave his consent. That ended the meeting and Tim saw that the Rio Kid's party was properly bunked down. They slept only a few hours, by the time the sun had topped the eastern horizon the next morning, they were again in the saddle.

They did not return to Vinegaroon with the speed with which they left it. Stamper's shoulder tortured the man and the Rio Kid held Saber down to an easy pace. The horse thief rode in the midst of the group, stubbled face slack with uncertainty and fear. The party rode through the main work camp, allowing the curious to get a good look at their captive. If any of Bannion's men were about, the Rio Kid planned to give them something to think and worry about.

The party pressed on without halt to distant Vinegaroon, arriving there late in the afternoon. The town still roared and boomed and the grim little cavalcade had a hard time pushing its way through the streets to Bean's saloon.

As they entered, the Rio Kid caught the sudden startled looks of several gunhung men. Three or four of them took one glance at Stamper and hurried off. The Rio Kid's jaw tightened. Spike Bannion would know about Stamper before long now.

Campbell stood at the bar when the Rio Kid pushed into the saloon. Bean tugged at his whiskers and shrewdly eyed Stamper. His face lighted.

"Looks like court will soon convene," he said. "What's this hombre done?"

"No charge yet, Roy." The Rio Kid spoke low, and shook his head. "But you'll hold court tomorrer mornin'. I want Malan and Bannion to have time to figger up some move. Tom, where can we hold our friend here so's he won't get away?"

"I reckon the best place would be a stout Sunset warehouse," Campbell said slowly.

"That will be where we're heading now," the Rio Kid announced. "And I think it would be a good idea to place a heavy guard there, just in case some hoodlums got a wrong idea into their heads."

"I'll see about some of my Rangers," Campbell promised.

CHAPTER IX

Stubborn Jailer

WITHIN half an hour Stamper was locked in a thick-walled room at the rear of a big warehouse near the tracks. Pat Garrett agreed to stand watch until Campbell could assign some of his Rangers to the task. Tired and hungry, the Rio Kid accepted Jack Edwards' invitation to eat at Molly Fair's little café.

It proved to be one of those places that could be knocked down and loaded on wagons to travel on to the next town the moment the railroad moved on. But it was clean, and Molly herself was beautiful. One glance at her lovely blue eyes, her friendy smile, and trim little figure clad primly in gingham told the Rio Kid why Edwards had fallen in love with her.

The place was crowded at first but later Molly sat down at their table. She graciously made the Rio Kid and Celestino welcome, then her face clouded when Edwards mentioned Malan and the attempted theft of his horses.

"Jack," she declared, "he's out to get you one way or another. You must be careful!"

"I'm not worried about Malan—" Jack began, but Molly broke in, her lips set seriously.

"But I am. He was in here this afternoon. He keeps making hints about you, Jack, veiled threats. That worries me. Spike Bannion sat beside him, nursing a coffee cup and watching me over the rim. There's something about him that's dangerous."

"She's right, Jack," the Rio Kid cut in before Edwards could answer. "Stamper's arrest is the first move we've made. From now on in we'll be fightin' catch-as-catch-can."

"But I'm not afraid of him!" Edwards insisted.

"It's not a case of bein' afraid," the Rio Kid answered. "It's just makin' shore yuh look every way at once. Bannion won't care how or when he hits when he decides to strike."

He changed the conversation then, and shortly he and Celestino left for their hotel. Edwards would probably be at the little café for several more hours, and the Rio Kid didn't blame him.

Roy Bean pulled himself out of a lobby chair when the Rio Kid came into the hotel. He had been waiting.

"Thought I'd tell yuh," he said, "that yore prisoner's done got a lawyer. He was a slick young gent that came in talkin' about illegal arrest. I told him I hadn't arrested nobody or tried nobody."

"Malan's man," the Rio Kid said thoughtfully. He looked shrewdly at Bean. "Yore appointment's in order? There'll be no legal question about yuh as a judge?"

Bean spat elaborately to one side and wiped the back of his hand across his whiskers.

"There ain't been no gent in Vinegaroon so far as had the nerve to question it," he averred. "But if there was, and I figgered he was a heap faster on the draw'n me, I'd show him my appintment signed by the governor of this here state."

"That's taken care of then," the Rio Kid said with relief.

"But what about this hombre yuh got tied up?"

"Trial in the mornin'," the Rio Kid said. "Yuh might let this lawyer yuh was talkin' about get word of it."

Roy Bean scratched his head, pushing his hat over his shoe-button eyes.

"Ain't never had no lawyer in my court before. Reckon mebbe I'd better spend the rest of the night readin' my lawbook."

"Just one?" The Rio Kid grinned.

"Ain't that enough?" Bean bristled. "See yuh in the mornin'." He walked out of the door like a dignified bear and the Rio Kid, with a chuckle, went up to his room.

The next morning, the Bean saloon was so crowded that there seemed danger that the walls would bulge out and collapse. The Rio Kid and Celestino pushed through the crowd to the little square table where Judge Roy Bean sat in rumpled grandeur. His eyes looked bloodshot as though he had been reading for hours without rest. The battered law book and the six-gun lay at his hand.

Two of Campbell's Rangers led Stamper up to the table. The man looked more cowed than ever, though he had refused to name the men who had hired him. The Rio Kid believed Stamper more frightened of Bannion and Malan than of the court.

Bean rapped on the table with the revolver

butt and blasphemously call for silence and order. It gradually came. Bean cleared his throat and glared at the prisoner.

"What's he charged with?"

The Rio Kid stepped forward.

"Hoss stealin' and helpin' in a murder."

"Mighty serious." Bean puffed out his lips, then glared at Stamper. "Guilty or not guilty?"

"Just a moment," a new voice spoke up.

A man shoved through the crowd to the cleared space before the table. He was about the Rio Kid's height, though resemblance stopped there. His lips were weak and his nose pointed. His gray eyes never fully met a direct glance but slid nervously away. He was dressed flashily in a checked suit.

"No man faces trial under the Texas law without being duly represented and defended by an attorney," he declared, and turned to Stamper. "Do you want an attorney?"

STAMPER shuffled uneasily and the Rio Kid caught the lawyer's swift wink. The outlaw brightened.

"Shore do. That's my right, ain't it?"

"I'm Frederick Carlen"—the lawyer bowed with a flourish to Bean—"duly admitted to the Texas bar. I shall speak for Mr. Stamper."

"Suit yoreself," Bean spat, "but it ain't goin' to do yuh much good."

"I object," Carlen snapped. "The court is already prejudiced."

"Objection overruled," Bean said lazily. "This court has only got its opinion, judgin' from what the court knows about that hombre's doin's."

"I'll ask change of venue!"

"Yuh can ask yore fool head off. There ain't no other court this side of Del Rio and I aim to try this case here and now. Rio Kid, yuh can state what yuh know about this here feller before me."

Carlen glared at Bean and then stepped back. The Rio Kid started to tell about the raid on the contractors' camp. He had said no more than a few words when Carlen cut in again.

"I object. The witness does not know of this by his own eyes. He is only guessing as to what might have happened and that's not admissable as evidence."

"Objection overruled," Bean drawled, and glared at the lawyer. "Yuh keep yore health in this country by guessin' what the other gent's goin' to do. I shore recommend it to yuh now. Go ahead, Rio Kid."

Twice within the next five minutes Carlen put in objections, and twice Bean overruled him. The judge clawed at his whiskers and shifted around in his seat. The Rio Kid told of finding the murdered guard and how Stamper had been with the group of renegades who had raided the cavvy.

"Somebody in that bunch killed the hoss guard," declared the Rio Kid, "to keep him from givin' an alarm."

"I object," Carlen snapped and glared at the Rio Kid. "You were not present. You can't know that of your own knowledge. You are trying to condemn my client only by suspicion."

Bean rapped the table with the gun butt. He stared hard at Carlen and spoke out of the corner of his mouth.

"Sam, bring me that coil of hemp from the back room."

A dead silence settled on the crowd while Bean's son disappeared. He returned in a moment with a coiled lariat over his arm. Wide grins began to appear in the crowd. Bean took the lariat and held it up before Frederick Carlen.

"Do yuh savvy what this is?"

"It's a rope," Carlen snapped, "but it has nothing to do with this trial. I object to such asides."

"But it has," Bean cut in. He pointed up toward the ceiling and the heavy rafters that supported the roof. "What is them?" he asked patiently.

Carlen made an irritable noise in his throat. "It's a beam, of course."

"Yes, Mr. Carlen." Bean's voice dropped to a low purr. He held up the rope. "Now this can go right over that beam and half a dozen of the boys can get on one end. So I hear one more objection, yore neck will go in the other end and the boys will pull. Do I make myself clear?"

Carlen's eyes popped wide. He stared at Bean and read the judge's intention of doing exactly what he said. He gulped and waved his hands.

"But, that's not—"

Bean tossed the lariat to a man in the front of the crowd.

"Yuh know what to do, boys."

Carlen's hand went up to his neck in a convulsive gesture. He looked pale and his eyes blinked. He turned and pushed his way through the crowd and disappeared. Bean's rapping stopped the roar of laughter. He

glared at Stamper.

"This court don't need to hear the rest of the story. Yuh're guilty as charged. I hereby sentence yuh to three days chained to the post outside. If yuh're anywheres along the Sunset rails at dawn of the fourth day, yuh'll be strung up to the nearest telegraph pole."

He rapped sharply on the table. "Sam, get that there chain and padlock."

Just outside the rear door of Bean's saloon was a thick, high post. A wide groove had been cut in it so that a chain locked around the post could not be slipped up over the top. Stamper was handcuffed to a chain that gave him some freedom of movement, and this to the heavy links around the post. Stamper could reach some shade in the day time, and at night Bean gave him a blanket. Stamper would have been far more uncomfortable in some of the insect-infested hovels that passed as jails in many a Western town.

THE Rio Kid had expected Bannion and Malan to put up more of a fight for Stamper. Once the man was chained, the Rio Kid tried to get information out of him. Stamper sullenly sat at the foot of the post and refused to talk. Celestino nudged the Rio Kid with his elbow.

"General, thees man he's stubborn. But he is know how the Yaqui use the knife point. Maybe he be very nice man then, eh?"

Stamper looked up with sudden alarm and the Rio Kid was tempted, but he shook his head.

"No, Celestino. But there's something else that might make a difference."

"Ain't nothin' yuh can do," Stamper growled. "I'm here three days and then I'm gettin' out of the country. Yuh can't hold me longer'n three days."

"Right," the Rio Kid agreed. "But once yuh leave Vinegaroon, a Ranger could pick yuh up again and take yuh to Del Rio. There's still the matter of the hoss guard's killin'. Yuh can be in jail a heap of years for that."

Stamper considered.

"Yuh're sayin' yuh won't bother me if I talk?" he finally asked.

"That's right," the Rio Kid told him.

Stamper rubbed his chin bristles with his hand so that they made a rasping sound. At last he shook his head.

"No. I reckon I'd better be in jail than dead. Yuh ain't gettin' nothin' from me."

"We'll see yuh're not touched," the Rio Kid promised.

Stamper only laughed mirthlessly. "Yuh don't know what yuh're talkin' about. I'd be trailed from here plumb to Hades if it took that to shut me up. Yuh're wastin' yore time."

He said it with such finality that the Rio Kid knew that it would be useless to argue further at the moment. By morning the man might be in a more reasonable mood. The Rio Kid left and Stamper slouched against the post, glaring at the saloon door as though he'd like to sink a knife in Bean's thick paunch.

Late that night Roy Bean stirred restlessly on his pallet, sighed and rolled over. Something shook him and he blindly tried to fight away from it. Out of nowhere a hand slapped hard across his face and Bean's eyes snapped open. The lamp had been lit and turned low. Spike Bannion towered over Bean and just beyond him Garnet Malan waited.

"Up on yore hunkers, Bean," Bannion growled.

He shoved a six into Bean's side. The judge swung his legs to the floor. Bannion stepped back and grinned at Malan. "He's on his feet. You take over from here, Garnet."

The gambler stepped to the table where the lamplight fell fully on his pointed face. For all his elegance, there was something sleek and dangerous about him.

"We want no trouble, Bean," he said, "and we want to save yuh a heap of hard knocks. Where's the key to the chain that holds Stamper?"

Bean was fully awake by now. His little eyes narrowed when he saw his son Sam securely trussed and gagged, sitting in a chair just outside the door. The saloon was dark and the town itself was comparatively quiet.

"How'd yuh get in here?" Bean demanded.

Malan made an impatient gesture with his hand. "Sam could be brighter, Bean. We gave him a good story and he let us in. Spike took care of Sam and now I hope Spike don't have to take care of you. Where is the key?"

"I don't know."

Malan leaned forward and his hand moved with the speed of a striking snake. Bean slammed back in the bunk, a red welt across his cheeks. Sheer hatred glared from his eyes and he tensed, ready to spring. Bannion chuckled.

"Don't try it, Judge. You wouldn't want a

[*Turn to Page 46*]

DICK WON ALL AROUND WHEN...

HERE'S A GRAND. IF THE FLASH LOSES, I'LL MAKE IT FIVE
O.K. IT'S IN THE BAG
AFTER GUARDING HIS HORSE ALL NIGHT, DICK O'NEIL, EX-MARINE AND OWNER OF "IWO JIMA", LONG SHOT, OVERHEARS SUSPICIOUS CONVERSATION ON MORNING OF BIG RACE
BETTER ACT FAST, MR. HILL. I WANT "IWO" TO BEAT YOUR HORSE, BUT I HATE CROOKS
I'LL CALL THE RACING ASSOCIATION
CAUGHT HIM RED-HANDED, MR. HILL. THE OLD SPONGE TRICK
MY OWN TRAINER! HOW COULD YOU DO SUCH A THING?
YOU'RE A REAL SPORTSMAN. WON'T YOU JOIN MY DAUGHTER AND ME IN OUR BOX?
THANKS... I'LL BE GLAD TO AT POSTTIME
FIRST CHANCE I'VE HAD TO SHAVE-AND NO RAZOR
COME ON, USE MINE
WHAT A SWELL BLADE, EDDIE! NEVER HAD A FASTER, SLICKER SHAVE
THIN GILLETTES ARE TOPS WITH ME. THEY'RE PLENTY KEEN
O-O-O-O! IWO WINS!
I SURE WISH FLASH HAD BEEN AS WELL-TRAINED
I'M GOING TO HIRE A NEW TRAINER, MR. O'NEIL. ANY CHANCE YOU'D CARE TO TALK BUSINESS TONIGHT?
SOUNDS GOOD TO ME, MR. HILL
I LIKE HIS LOOKS
TO GET SMOOTH, GOOD-LOOKING SHAVES WITH SPEED AND COMFORT, TRY THIN GILLETTE BLADES. THEY'RE KEEN, LONG-LASTING AND FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR PRECISELY. THUS THEY PROTECT YOUR FACE FROM THE IRRITATING EFFECT OF MISFIT BLADES. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES
THIN Gillette BLADES
4 for 10¢

hole in yore backbone, would yuh?"

He clicked back the gun hammer and Bean could only grip the edge of the cot and tremble with rage. Malan straightened and snapped his coat sleeves into place. He brushed his lapels.

"Yuh begin to savvy we ain't got time to waste, Bean," he drawled. "The quicker yuh talk the better it'll be. Now where's that key?"

"I ain't got it."

"Then get up and find it," Malan snapped.

"It ain't in the house," Bean answered.

Malan's eyes blazed. He smashed his fist in Bean's face and the old man's head slapped back against the wall. For a moment his brain spun dizzily and then the objects in the room settled into place. He felt the salt taste of blood in his mouth.

"Let me work on him," Bannion said, a purr to his voice.

Malan shook his head. "Not yet, Spike. Bean's goin' to see there ain't no use arguin'. He'll give us the key."

Bean dropped his hand from his mouth.

"Yuh're wastin' yore time, Malan. That key ain't on me or in the house."

"Who's got it?" Malan demanded.

"I done lost it."

Instantly Malan's fist lashed out. This time Bean caught the man's wrist and jerked him onto the cot. Before Bannion could fire, Malan's body shielded Bean. The judge's hamlike fist slammed home and Malan went slack. Bannion stepped in, and his gun barrel chipped down. Bean slumped to the cot.

CHAPTER X

The Spy

ROY BEAN didn't know how long he was out, but gradually his senses returned. He saw Malan sitting at the table, nursing a heavy lump on his jaw. Bannion, grim-faced, was watching Bean. He spoke a soft word to his boss when the judge opened his eyes. Malan glared across the room.

"I'm losin' patience, Bean," he said challengingly.

"Use a chisel on the chain," Bean growled.

Bannion circled Malan and stepped up to the cot. Sam made muffled noises in his gag and threshed around on the chair. No one paid any attention to him. Bannion held his gun barrel under Bean's nose.

"See that front sight, Bean? It can rip a man's face up so almighty bad he'll look like he tangled with barbed wire. We aim to get Stamper free, and get him free plumb quiet. Now yuh got yore choice of diggin' out that key or losin' that ugly face of yores."

"And yuh only got a minute to make up yore mind," Malan said.

Bean glared at them and swallowed hard. He knew what a gun-sight could do. He glanced around the room and suddenly his eyes fixed on the door, widened. Bannion saw the expression and grinned slowly.

"It won't work, Bean. I know there ain't nobody at the door and I ain't turnin' so's yuh can grab my gun."

"Then yuh'd better take a look," a cold voice said.

Bannion stared and froze, gun still held at Bean's face. Malan twisted around his chair, his hand streaking up to his coat lapels. The Rio Kid's voice cracked like a whip.

"Hold it, Malan. I'd like to have yuh in jail, not in Boot Hill."

Malan jerked his empty hand away and came to his feet. Bannion spoke without turning his head.

"I got a six under Bean's nose, hombre. Drop yore gun and step over to the wall. Yuh don't, I'll blow the judge's head off."

"Malan," the Rio Kid said quietly, "I'll give yuh till I count three to order Bannion to drop that six. If he don't, or if he harms the judge, yuh'll get a slug through yore belt buckle."

The tableau held. Malan's forehead, in the lamplight, showed a line of small sweat beads. Bannion remained with his gun an inch from Bean's face. The judge couldn't move, beady eyes locked on the Rio Kid's lithe shape. Only Sam continued to squirm and make muffled noises by the door. Malan carefully leaned forward, arms a stiff support against the table.

"Put up the six, Spike," he finally said.

"He won't shoot," Bannion sneered. "He's bluffin'."

"Put it up, yuh hear me!" Malan suddenly shouted. His slack lips trembled. "You don't know he's bluffin'! It's me that'll get the slug. Holster yore Colt."

Bannion narrowly searched Malan's face

almost as if he couldn't believe what he heard. The Rio Kid's gun hammers clicked back with a loud finality. Bannion swore under his breath and dropped his gun. Bean slumped back against the wall in relief. The Rio Kid didn't move a muscle.

"Lift that other six out of leather, Bannion, and drop it. Malan, reach careful inside yore coat and bring out that hideout."

Both men complied without a word. Bean jumped up from the bunk and scooped up the weapons. He whipped around, battered face showing angry triumph. The Rio Kid's calm voice checked him.

"Stay where yuh are, Roy. These snakes would like for yuh to get between me and them. It'd give 'em a chance."

"I'd take it, too," Spike Bannion said easily and his heavy eyes lighted eagerly.

Bean checked himself. The Rio Kid looked from Malan to Bannion.

"Yuh've made yore move, gents," he said, "that's hooked yuh in with the dirty work. Now I reckon yuh can figger on joinin' yore friend out at the stake."

Malan's head jerked up. Now that the immediate threat to his life was gone, he had gained more courage. He smiled thinly and shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm not so shore of that, Pryor. If yuh want to break this town wide open, chain us out there. But you'd better have more than a few Rangers to hold us and keep you out of Boot Hill. Don't try to ride us to Del Rio, either. Yuh'll never make it."

The Rio Kid's jaw muscles tightened. Bannion grinned lazily and his brows arched up mockingly.

"Ready for a showdown, Pryor? We can shore give it to yuh. Go ahead—chain us out there and see what happens."

"Yuh can't bluff us!" Bean snorted disgustedly.

"Yuh can find out," Spike answered shortly.

The Rio Kid shifted, moving to one side of the door. He made a slight gesture with one of his guns.

"Get out of here, both of yuh. We can call this a draw hand but don't bank on gettin' the good cards next deal. I'll ask for the showdown when I'm ready for it."

"Yuh mean when we're ready," Malan snapped.

He jerked at his lapels to straighten his coat. With a signal to Bannion he moved toward the door. The Rio Kid stepped further back, warily watching both men. He followed them through the barroom to the street and watched them disappear in the night.

WHEN he turned around, Roy Bean had taken the gag out of Sam's mouth and was busy sawing through the ropes with a knife. The old man stopped, straightened, and glared at the Rio Kid.

"Why in blazin' Tophet did yuh let them snakes go! We could have chained 'em right out there with Stamper and held 'em for trial. Shucks, I could have sentenced 'em to years and years!"

"Bannion and Malan know where we stand," the Rio Kid replied. "Every renegade and gunslammer in Vinegaroon would have been burnin' powder to get 'em loose. We ain't organized yet and Campbell ain't got enough Rangers to stop an attack like that, without help."

"But blast it, look what they did! Yuh goin' to let 'em get away with it?"

"No," the Rio Kid snapped. "Yuh'll get yore chance at 'em, Bean."

The judge cut the last of the ropes and stamped angrily to the bar. He snapped off a beer top, tipped the bottle and didn't lower it until the container was empty. He slapped it down on the bar.

"How did yuh happen to get here?" he asked the Rio Kid.

"One of Pat's boys saw Malan and Bannion force their way in past Sam. He came to the hotel and woke me up. Celestino went to find Campbell just in case of trouble. Malan and Bannion went to a heap of trouble to get a key."

"Yeah, didn't they?"

Bean suddenly chuckled. He rounded the bar and walked to his bedroom. He moved the metal-base lamp over and a key winked up in the light.

"Right under Malan's fingers all the time. I was shore scared he'd move that lamp!"

As they returned to the saloon, Celestino and two Rangers came hurrying in. The Rio Kid told them what had happened and why he had let Malan and Bannion go. Campbell listened and nodded glum approval.

"It was shore a shame, but better luck next time. If they'd waited a couple of days, we'd have had 'em dead to rights and could dare 'em to do what they could."

Roy Bean's bruises and cuts were patched up, but he seemed to get more relief from his beer bottles than from any medical atten-

tion. Sam went around muttering dire threats under his breath. There was nothing more that could be done at the saloon so the Rio Kid, Celestino and Campbell left. One of the Rangers was left to watch Stamper so that he would not escape, and to guard the battered judge.

The Rio Kid did not go right to bed once he had reached his hotel room. He stood by the dark window, looking thoughtfully out into the night. Celestino waited. At last the Rio Kid turned impatiently toward the bed.

"We were caught before we were ready," he said tightly. "First thing in the mornin' I'm goin' to see that Tim Kelly gets his Irishmen ready. I want to give Pat Garrett instructions for his boys. I think, amigo, it's about time Malan and Bannion had a hard lesson punched home to 'em."

He went to bed but slept just a few hours. He arose early and was soon busy, talking to Kelly, urging him to finish the job of rounding up his men. The Irishman nodded and grinned in anticipation.

"Shure, and ye'll be havin' them all ready by the mornin'. I'll see ye tonight and ye can pass your orders then."

Garrett listened, later, to the Rio Kid's specific directions. The gaunt lawman stroked his long mustache and his lazy eyes gleamed. Without a word, he arose and hitched his gun to a better position on his leg.

"Yuh can depend on it, Rio Kid," he said. "The boys'll be ready for trouble if it comes and blamed glad to meet it." He started to the door and stopped, smiling slightly. "I reckon I'll want to see this."

The Rio Kid and Celestino spent most of the morning around the railroad offices. From superintendents and managers, the Rio Kid began to piece together the history of damage and destruction, of assault and murder that had dogged the Sunset.

Always, though when the Rio Kid tried to get a line on any one person behind the trouble, the trail faded. So far as actual proof went, only Border riff-raff had caused it all. Celestino at last spread his hands wide and shrugged.

"General, these theeng she's not good. Por Dios, she is like following the wind, no?"

"Looks like it," the Rio Kid admitted, "except that Malan sort of gave us a peek at his cards. Soonor or later we'll hit a trail if we keep at it."

But for several hours it seemed that there was to be no such trail.

The two companions had wandered into the engineering office. On long tables the track surveys and plans were unrolled and men busied themselves over them. The chief engineer led the Rio Kid into his corner where only a flimsy partition separate him from the rest of the room.

FOR a time the questions and answers followed the same pattern. Then the engineer frowned at the window, pulling deeply on his pipe.

"I gather, Captain Pryor, from the way you word your questions, that you think the Southern Pacific might be behind all this."

"You must admit that someone connected with it, perhaps for an outside reason entirely could be one of several chances," the Rio Kid said slowly. "I don't like to figger anybody connected with a big, straight outfit pullin' somethin' crooked, but I have to consider every angle."

"I understand that." The engineer nodded. "The Southern Pacific has a man right here in Vinegaroon, watching the progress we're making on the Sunset, and making reports. Understand we have a man in El Paso ourselves who does the same thing. The SP man is posing as a drummer for an Eastern mercantile house."

"How do you know?" the Rio Kid asked.

The engineer grinned. "Several years ago, I was assigned to the same job," he said. "I worked with this same Jermyn for a while for another line. You find Jessup J. Jermyn and maybe you can get a better idea from talking to him."

The Rio Kid leaned back in his chair and caught Celestino's swift glance. He nodded slightly and arose, thanking the engineer for the information. The two men left the office and returned once more to Vinegaroon's main street. The Rio Kid started making inquiries about the drummer and the trail led him right back to his own hotel. At last he knocked on a door just a few feet down the corridor from his own.

It was opened and a small, nattily dressed man looked inquiringly up at the Rio Kid. He wore pince nez, the ribbon attached to the broad lapel of his dark coat. His thick, black brows were pulled down in a portentous frown. He looked like a dwarf aching for a fight, but his voice was high-pitched and he had a slight lisp.

"Well?" he asked, when he had acknowl-

edged that he was Jessup J. Jermyn.

"I reckon you and me had better have a talk," the Rio Kid said. "I understand yuh're watchin' the Sunset tracks."

Jermyn bristled.

"I'm a drummer, sir. I am not interested in railroads."

The Rio Kid smiled and pushed into the room. Celestino moved after him, closed the door and leaned against it. The little man glared from one to the other.

"You will both get out of here instantly or I shall call the Rangers!" he shouted. "This is an outrage, sir!"

"Before yuh tangle yore loop any further, Jermyn, I'm Captain Pryor, mostly called the Rio Kid." Jermyn's brows shot up and his anger seemed to drain away. The Rio Kid instantly caught the change. "I see the name is down in yore tally book. Now go ahead and call the Rangers, sir."

Jermyn rocked back and forth on his pointed shoes. He glanced around the room.

"Maybe I misjudged you, Captain," he said uncertainly. "My apologies. But I am only a drummer, sir."

"Now as to that," the Rio Kid said easily, "I'll judge. Let me make somethin' clear, Jermyn. The Sunset has its man at El Paso doin' exactly the same job you're doin' here. Watchin' a competitor's progress is part of the game. But I want information and we'd better get this point straightened up now."

Jermyn fiddled around, popping his glasses off his nose and whirling them on the end of the ribbon. He watched the Rio Kid closely and at last cleared his throat.

"Suppose I insist that I'm a drummer?" he asked.

"Then I reckon I'll have to decide yuh're a spy for the Southern and have yuh shipped right out of Vinegaroon. I can keep yuh off the whole Sunset system, Jermyn. And I will, if yuh force me."

"If I admit your charge, sir?"

"So long as yuh do yore job of reportin' progress, and no more"—the Rio Kid's piercing eyes impaled Jermyn—"I won't bother yuh. We're havin' trouble, Jermyn. So far, I'm justified in believin' yuh're behind it, for the Southern Pacific profits by every delay. That's enough for yuh to be sent on yore way."

"Who will take the authority to send me on my way?" Jermyn demanded.

"If the Rangers won't do it, I will," the Rio Kid snapped.

CHAPTER XI

Fire and Gunsmoke

JERMYN nodded slightly. A frown on his face, he paced to the window, turned, and caught sight of Celestino leaning negligently against the door. He lifted his shoulders slightly and dropped them, then sat down on the edge of the bed.

"I'm not very good at it, am I?" he asked with a rueful laugh. "I'm an engineer and this is only the second job like this I've ever held. What do you want to know?"

"Do yuh know Garnet Malan?"

The Rio Kid shot the question suddenly and keenly watched for reaction. There was none. Jermyn instantly nodded.

"I know of him, Pryor. I've been at his places several times and I've lost a few dollars there. The man's too slippery to appeal to me."

"How about Spike Bannion?"

"Malan's gun dog. I've had him pointed out to me, but I've never met him."

"The Sunset's trouble must be pleasin' to you, sir," the Rio Kid switched the subject.

Jermyn spread his hands. "What would you expect, Pryor? I want to see my own company get ahead. I'll be proud of the track-laying record the Southern will roll up over the Sunset." He checked and looked hard at the Rio Kid his jaw muscles tightening. "I see what you mean."

"Do yuh blame me?"

"Not for thinkin' it, sir, up until now. But get this straight. I want the Southern Pacific to get ahead. I'd like to see the Sunset whipped to a frazzle. But I want it done fairly and squarely. I want no sidewinding, sneaking plays. It should be a fair and open fight within all the rules of decent competition."

The Rio Kid said nothing for a long while. Celestino watched Jermyn and then his dark eyes turned to his "General" as he had called the Rio Kid through all their long, close friendship. The Mexican moved away from the door as though there were no further need to guard it. He rolled a cigarette and lit it. The Rio Kid smiled.

"I reckon we'll let things ride as they are, Jermyn," he said to the little SP man.

"You must understand," the little man said before accepting the Rio Kid's hand, "that I have nothing to do with any robbing or killing. I do not countenance underhand methods and will not be a party to them."

"Understand," the Rio Kid answered easily and took his leave of the Southern Pacific agent. He and Celestino went to their room and the moment the door closed behind them, Celestino touched the Rio Kid's arm."

"General, you believe thees man? He is say he is muy bueno, but where is the proof?"

The Rio Kid skipped his hat to the bed and sighed, pouring himself a drink from the water pitcher on the little stand. He stared thoughtfully out the window before he answered.

"Jermyn is mighty convincin', *amigo*. I got a proddy hunch to read him with a straight brand. But there has been other gents before who could talk just as straight and honest and still be crooked as a dog's hind leg."

"But thees Jermyn?" Celestino insisted. "What of heem?"

"The Sunset gets in trouble and the Southern Pacific profits," the Rio Kid answered slowly. "We can't forget that, no matter where the trail leads or what anybody says to us. Right now, I'm inclined to believe Senor Jermyn, but blamed if I can see who else can profit from the Sunset losses except him and his company."

"Senores Malan and Bannion?" Celestino asked.

"They profit somewheres along the line," the Rio Kid agreed, "but tinhorns and gunslammers haven't got the nerve and imagination to wreck a whole railroad—unless somebody is behind 'em. No, amigo, for all we know Jermyn is the power and money behind Malan. We can just take his word, as we've done, and keep on watching him. I reckon one of Pat's boys can take over that job."

" 'Sta bueno," Celestino smiled. "There are many rat-holes, no? And eef one is forgotten, the rats she's play everywhere. "

"Now that," the Rio Kid laughed, "is one way of saying it."

By late in the afternoon, the Rio Kid was ready to make his first move against Malan. Pat Garrett and his men would be in the big tent saloon around eleven. A few minutes afterward, Tim Kelly and his boys would be waiting on the street.

The Rio Kid wanted Malan's saloon to be filled when he gave the tinhorn the final ultimatum. If it were done thus openly and the whole of Vinegaroon saw the destruction that would follow if Malan refused, then the other outlaws and leeches would be brought more quickly to terms.

PAT GARRETT and Tim Kelly grinned widely as they got their instructions. The Rio Kid gave them a final order.

"Plans will stand as they are unless somethin' happens," he said in parting. "If I'm not at Malan's place at eleven, then be ready for a change, and pronto."

"Yuh think there's a chance of trouble?" Pat sobered.

"Not that I know of," the Rio Kid answered, "but I give Malan credit for being a shrewd hombre. He's likely to pull somethin' out of the hat to beat me to the punch. He figgers I'll call a showdown most any time."

Up until nine o'clock Vinegaroon howled and roared as usual and the streets were jammed. The Rio Kid and Celestino ate at Molly Fair's café and talked to Jack Edwards. The young contractor reported that there seemed to be no more trouble at his camp.

"Stamper's capture and trial sort of threw a good healthy fear into them hombres," he said. He looked sharply at the Rio Kid. "Say, what sort of deal yuh got ready for Malan tonight?"

The Rio Kid couldn't hide his surprise. "What yuh mean?"

Edwards grinned. "Shucks, yuh can't keep anything hid in Vinegaroon. The whisper has been goin' all over town. Malan's place will be tight packed by now."

The Rio Kid frowned and looked sharply at Celestino. He swung back to Edwards.

"If you got some word, then Malan will have, too. He'll have every gunslammer and killer in Vinegaroon at that tent. Pat's boys won't have a chance."

Celestino arose from the stool.

"I go find Senor Pat, General."

"I'll find Tim Kelly," the Rio Kid said tightly. "Those Irishmen won't have anything more than their clubs and fists. It'll be plain murder up against smokin' sixes."

"No, you don't," Edwards interrupted. "Bannion's snakes will be lookin' for yuh tonight, Rio Kid. I'll find Garrett and Tim."

"I'm not hidin', Jack," the Rio Kid said

quietly and then smiled to take the sting from his words, "but yuh can get ahold of Campbell and tell his boys to be ready for big trouble, if yuh want to."

The three men left the café, the Rio Kid and Celestino plunging instantly into the pleasure-mad crowd that filled the streets. They had luck. Not a block away they found Pat Garrett and passed the warning that Malan would be ready for trouble. Garrett swore fervently.

"Blast it! And I was plumb achin' to bring the tent down around that gent's ears."

"Too dangerous," the Rio Kid snapped.

"Still like to try," Pat sighed, then shrugged. "Yuh're right, of course. I know where Tim is and I'll—Hey! What's that?"

The Rio Kid whirled and looked in the direction of Garrett's pointing finger. A red glow showed against the black night sky and even as the Rio Kid looked, an angry licking tongue of flame shot high above the low buildings.

"The warehouses!" the Rio Kid exclaimed. "More trouble!"

He broke into a run, shouldering aside those who stood between him and the street. Someone else saw the flames and a shout rocked down the street. In a moment a streaming flood of humans rushed after the Rio Kid. He rounded the next corner and sped toward the railroad tracks.

Everywhere sounded shouts of alarm. Someone emptied a six-gun into the air in a staccato rhythm and it was picked up somewhere on the next street. The Rio Kid turned at the next corner and saw the long line of warehouses ahead of him.

One at the far end was slightly detached from the others. Smoke rolled out of the doors and through cracks in the side. The Rio Kid could see an angry red glow within the building and flames had broken out on the roof, curling and crackling around the eaves.

Already men had formed a bucket-line and the water barrels of the nearby warehouses were pressed into service. A single glance told the Rio Kid that the building itself could not be saved with the limited water supply. He rushed to the line and waved his hand toward the next warehouse.

"Save that one!" his powerful voice roared above the flames. "This one's gone! Get that roof soaked with water!"

Instantly the men saw the wisdom of his order. The line swung over and the buckets passed more swiftly. Railroad workers appeared from nowhere and quickly started moving the crated supplies from the threatened warehouse.

Pat Garrett came up to the Rio Kid, grabbed his arm and gestured toward the burning building. The Rio Kid could not hear him above the noise. At last Garrett put his lips close to the Rio Kid's ears and yelled:

"Where's the watchman? He should have been around when the fire broke out!"

THE Rio Kid snapped erect, and motioned Pat to follow him. Celestino fell in beside them as they skirted the burning building and raced down its length. Smoke billowed down in choking clouds that half smothered them.

Heat reached out, and the steady crackle of the fire kept a constant roaring in their ears. At the far corner a small door opened into the warehouse office. The Rio Kid flung himself against it, believing it to be locked.

It banged open so suddenly that he could not check himself until he struck the high counter. The place was filled with smoke and the Rio Kid's eyes were blinded by tears. He heard Celestino's worried call and answered it. Garrett struck a match but the smoke was so thick that the flame revealed nothing.

The Rio Kid felt his way along the counter until he came to the swinging gate. He pushed it inward. It struck something and would go no further. A low moan sounded from the floor.

"Pat!" the Rio Kid called. "Here he is. Give me a lift!"

He dropped to the floor and was grateful for the sweep of comparatively cool and clear air. He pulled the gate toward him and his groping fingers touched cloth, traveled over the legs and body of a man. Pat Garrett and Celestino came groping forward and blundered into the Rio Kid.

In a breath of time they had dragged the man across the floor and out the door. They carried him away from the building, rushing him away from the heat and blinding smoke. Celestino and Garrett gently lowered the man and bent over him beside the Rio Kid. Instantly they saw the bloody mess along his side. The Rio Kid looked up at his companions, tight-faced.

"Buck shot," he said quietly. "And boys, that means this fire was deliberately set."

"Hey," Pat exclaimed softly, "he's comin' around."

The watchman was an old man with a shock of white tangled hair. His wrinkled face was pale and drawn. He moved his head from side to side and moaned again. Suddenly his eyes opened and he stared up into the Rio Kid's face.

Uncertainly he moved his eyes to Pat, and to Celestino.

"We pulled yuh out of the fire," the Rio Kid said softly. "Who set it?"

A spasm of pain crossed the man's face. It passed and once more his eyes opened.

"I don't know," he said in a weak voice. "I don't know."

"Did yuh get a look at 'em?" Pat asked.

"No. They wore bandannas up over their faces. I heard—a knock at the door and—answered it. A masked man stuck a shotgun—in my side—the rest came pilin' in. They—they had a whole mule string to pack—away the stuff. They—shot me when I—tried to stop 'em. Last I know—till now."

"Yuh didn't see 'em set the fire?" the Rio Kid asked. The man wearily shook his head.

"No—but they was fixin' paper, trash—coal oil when I—passed out. Yuh don't think it's my fault, do yuh? I couldn't—"

He suddenly stiffened and his eyes seemed to bug out. He took a deep breath that rattled and then he went slack, dead. The Rio Kid slowly shook his head and arose. Pat Garrett dropped his hat over the dead man's face.

"Poor old gent," Pat sighed.

"Masked men," the Rio Kid said between set teeth. "This means that Malan knew what was planned for his place so Bannion's gunslammers and thieves hit here and set the fire."

"We're too blamed busy to bother Malan now," Pat said bitterly, "and the Sunset's been hit again."

The Rio Kid whirled on him.

"Gather yore boys, Pat. All of 'em. Meet me at the railroad station inside a quarter of an hour. See that yore men have plenty of ammunition, and water."

"Yuh're ridin' after 'em!" Pat exulted, then his face dropped. "But shucks, where yuh goin' to look? Texas is all-fired big."

"South," the Rio Kid snapped. "This was too bold for them owlhoots to hold onto the loot for long. They'll rush it right across the Rio Grande and then straggle back here, actin' as innocent as lambs. I intend to catch 'em with the loot still in their hands. Hit leather, Pat—pronto!"

CHAPTER XII

Owlhoot Trail

NEEDING no urging, Garrett turned on his heel and raced off. The Rio Kid and Celestino found one of Campbell's Rangers to take care of the dead watchman, then they sped for the Vinegaroon Livery. Saber and Celestino's horse were saddled in short order. They made a brief pause at the hotel for extra ammunition and filled their canteens, then they shoved their way through the snarled traffic to the railroad station.

Pat Garrett and eight of his men were waiting for the Rio Kid. Jack Edwards came riding up and wheeled his horse in beside Saber. He grinned at the Rio Kid.

"Pat told me what's up, so here I am. I figger yuh can always use an extra man and an extra gun on a job like this."

"Thanks," the Rio Kid said, "but you don't have to throw in, Jack."

"I know it." Edwards nodded. "But yuh helped me at the gradin' camp and I can help you. Them thievin' devils stole a whole month's supply of food and ammunition out of that warehouse—which'll hit the Sunset plumb hard. And what hits the Sunset now, will hit me tomorrow or the next day. Let's ride."

The Rio Kid glanced hastily over the men. Each one wore an extra cartridge belt, and canteens hung at their saddles. Satisfied, the Rio Kid wheeled Saber and motioned forward with his arm. The lawmen fell in behind him and Pat.

They had headed directly south when the warehouse suddenly caved in, and sparks shot high into the sky. Pat Garrett twisted around in his saddle, watching the scurrying men who were fighting the fire. At last he straightened.

"They'll keep her from spreadin'," he said. "Blamed lucky that fire was seen in time. Wouldn't have been nothin' left."

No one said anything and the grim cavalcade soon left Vinegaroon behind. The Rio Kid headed directly toward the distant Rio Grande, making no attempt to find the bandits' trail. There were only a few places

where they could cross the Rio Grande into Mexico and sign could be picked up at any of these with less loss of time than searching for it now.

As they rode on into the badlands they rounded gaunt buttes that projected with startling abruptness up from the desert floor. Then these were left behind and the land dropped in a gentle descent to the level of the distant river. To their left was the broken country around the Pecos River in its canyon. Starlight did not penetrate the deep shadows and the moon would not be up for several hours.

At last they came to the river and the Rio Kid pulled in Saber. He spoke a few brief words that sent some of the men to the left toward the Pecos. The rest of them went upstream. If the Rio Kid had judged aright, the pursuers had beaten the heavily laden mule train to the fords and could intercept them easily.

The ford was deserted when the band arrived and there was no way of telling whether the bandits had come this way or not. The river bank was broken and marked by the passing of many horses, but this passage was in constant use. The Rio Kid placed his men to guard the ford, then signaled Celestino and Jack Edwards.

"We'll ride on south into Mexico," he told them, "just in case them outlaws managed to slip by. Pat and the boys can take care of the bandits if they haven't crossed yet, and try to."

Celestino and Edwards swung in beside the Rio Kid and the three men splashed across the shallow waters of the ford and climbed the low bank into Mexico. With a single backward glance, the Rio Kid set Saber forward at an easy loping run, with Celestino and Edwards riding at either side of him.

In a short time the ford and river had disappeared behind them. They followed a regular trail heading toward some of the adobe villages that clustered close around the river. To the right a low line of hummocks cut their vision and, after a time, the Rio Kid veered toward them. They crested the mounds and drew rein. Instantly Celestino deeply sniffed the air.

"Dust, Senor. Many horse he's go by this way maybe a minute ago."

"I got it, too," the Rio Kid answered. "Not more than five minutes anyway. It may be the gents we want."

He sent Saber down the descent and at the foot of the hummock swung out of saddle. He bent to the ground, examining it, working gradually in ever widening circles. Suddenly he uttered a soft exclamation.

"They been this way, all right. Just ahead of us and ridin' fast."

"Yuh mean they beat us to the ford?" Edwards exclaimed.

"Looks like it. We haven't time to go back for the men, either. If the bandits get a chance, they'll scatter and we'll never pick up the trail. Willin' to ride after 'em now?"

"If yuh've got the nerve, I have," Edwards said shortly, and loosened the Colt in his holster. "We're wastin' time here."

THE Rio Kid smiled and stepped back into saddle. He lightly touched Saber with his blunted spurs and the dun eagerly sprang forward. The Rio Kid followed the trail. It wound into a series of gentle knolls, sear and sand-covered, that cut the vision to a matter of yards. The hills pressed in closer but the mark of the mule train continued to wind in and out of them.

Suddenly the Rio Kid felt the strange

[*Turn page*]

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shiver he knew so well go up Saber's back. Instantly he drew rein. That warning had saved his life many times before and the Rio Kid never disregarded it.

His keen eyes probed the darkness ahead and toward the low crest of the hills. He could see nothing, but Saber pranced nervously and once more the shiver passed up the wide black stripe. The Rio Kid's hand dropped down to his holster. Edwards waited impatiently.

"Ride on!" he exclaimed. "Them jaspers will get plumb to Monterrey before we catch up with 'em."

"See anything, Celestino?" the Rio Kid snapped.

The young Mexican shook his head, but he was tense and ready for action.

"No, General."

Without warning a wave of riders broke over the low crest to the right. Edwards yelled and wheeled his horse just as another band came up over the ridge to the left. The Rio Kid's hands slashed down to his holsters and his sixes jerked free.

"Back toward the river!" he yelled. "We got a chance!"

The three men wheeled their horses. The Rio Kid's Colts blasted to left and right. Instantly a veritable sheet of flame leaped at them from either side. Bullets whined, filling the air around their heads with the deadly sound of searching death. Saber streaked northward, following the direction of the Rio Kid's slight knee pressure.

The bandits swept in to close the trap. The Rio Kid leaned forward over Saber's outstretched neck. The dun raced for safety and the way looked open before the Rio Kid. He twisted around, blasting lead toward the dark waves of horsemen that closed in from either side.

He saw two men go down before his guns. Orange flames licked toward him. Celestino returned the fire and the Rio Kid caught the white flash of the Mexican's excited grin. Edwards rode grimly, spurring to keep up with Saber.

Abruptly Jack Edwards pitched forward out of saddle, rolling along the ground and coming to a limp, sprawling halt. Instantly the Rio Kid swung Saber around. His Colts roared and thundered and the front rank of bandits broke before the spray of leaden death. A horse went down, a man screamed. Grimly the Rio Kid swung low in the saddle, long arm outstretched to grab Edwards' belt as he swept by.

Celestino yelled a warning and the Rio Kid straightened. Two masked men rode down on him, guns winking. Saber swerved to avoid the shock, but didn't quite succeed. The outlaw riders hit the dun and the three animals went down in a threshing tangle of legs.

The Rio Kid threw himself clear of the saddle and struck the ground on his shoulders. He rolled like a ball for several feet, then checked himself. He came to his feet with his guns winking and spitting in either hand. He couldn't see Celestino and the roar of gunfire drowned out all other sound. A band of horsemen came rushing down on him and he grimly set himself to make his life as costly as possible to the killers.

Guns blasted at him and he returned the fire until his guns clicked empty and he hurled them away. His hands darted inside his shirt, fingers snatching out the hideout sixes. They came clear but the riders were practically on top of him.

He had a blurred glimpse of strained and stubbled faces, eyes gleaming in wicked triumph. Something seered hot, fiery, along his skull and his brain seemed to explode into a thousand burning fragments. He felt nothing more. . . .

LIGHT from somewhere annoyed the Rio Kid. It seeped in through his eyelids and sent lances of shooting pain through his brain. He moved his head to avoid it but it still probed at him. He tried to move and felt a horrible spinning sensation that finally slowed down like the swing of a pendulum.

He opened his eyes and everything was bleary and wavering. At last his eyes focused, and he saw that he was looking out through an open doorway into a dirty street.

He turned his head and saw Celestino's

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dark face. The Mexican hovered over him, worry in his brown eyes. At the Rio Kid's glance, Celestino smiled and heaved up a sigh from his boot heels.

"Gracias a Dios! I had feared thees time you are gone, General."

The Rio Kid blinked and tried to speak, but his throat seemed constricted. Celestino gave him a drink from a canteen. It was then that the Rio Kid realized that his head was bandaged. He touched the cloth and looked up inquiringly at Celestino.

"You have taken the bullet, General," Celestino answered the silent question. "Thees bandit ride us down. Por Dios, you be dead had the bullet been one leetle hair deeper."

"Edwards?" the Rio Kid asked. Celestino shrugged. "I do not know. I not see heem."

"I can tell yuh," a voice said in rough triumph from the door. Celestino wheeled and the Rio Kid saw Spike Bannion's sardonic, pointed face. "Edwards is dead. We got him. Looks like we got you, too."

"Where are we?" the Rio Kid asked.

Celestino remained by the head of the bed, glaring at Bannion. The outlaw leader remained in the doorway, one hand resting lightly on his Colt handle. A cigarette curled a wisp of smoke upward from his cruel lips.

"In my hideout, Pryor," Bannion condescended to drawl. "Yore little stunt didn't work. We got the mules across the river ahead of yuh. One of the boys spotted yuh comin' and we set a trap. Edwards is dead like I said, and you won't be long in follerin' him."

"When?" the Rio Kid asked steadily.

"Soon as Garnet Malan gets word about yuh. I figger he'd like to be around when yuh start for Boot Hill. Besides, I'm busy right now with them warehouse supplies."

"Yuh won't get away with it, Spike."

The gunhawk laughed. "I figger I can. It's worth a try. Pat Garrett is plumb wearin' a groove along the Rio Grande, lookin' for yuh. Well, I'll be comin' again. When I do, I'll have the boys bring along a shutter to cart yuh to Boot Hill."

He turned and walked out the doorway. A one-eyed Mexican, armed to the teeth looked in, grinned, and made an insulting sign before squatting down before the door, his rifle placed across his bony knees.

For a time the Rio Kid said nothing and Celestino paced angrily back and forth. But the Rio Kid felt his strength returning. The dizziness had left him, though his head still ached as though it would split. He tried to think but always came up against the hard fact that he was a prisoner, unarmed and guarded. At last he rolled over on his side and dropped off to sleep.

It was night when he awakened. There was no light in the hut, though he heard Celestino stirring around. From outside came the distant sound of a guitar and the murmur of voices in the street. The bulky shadow of the guard passed the door, then passed again. The Rio Kid swung his feet over the side of the bunk and stood up. For a moment dizziness returned and threatened to overwhelm him, but that passed.

"Celestino," he said in a low whisper. Instantly his friend was at his side. "Where's Saber? Did they get him?"

"No, Senor, he is get loose. They try to catch heem but is no use."

The Rio Kid rubbed his hand along his jaw and watched the door. When the sentry passed again, the Rio Kid made a quick estimate of his height. He said a few words in a low whisper to Celestino and both men crept to the door. They flattened themselves to either side. The sentry came again.

The Rio Kid gave a soft moan and the guard checked himself. He stood irresolute, and the Rio Kid moaned again. The man came closer to the door, rifle held ready. The Rio Kid tensed, digging his heels into the hard-packed ground for a better purchase. The sentry stood almost in the doorway now. Suddenly the Rio Kid swung around, hand striking down for the rifle.

AT THE same moment Celestino came silently into action. His hands caught the sentry's throat, the fingers choking off all sound. The Rio Kid jerked away the rifle. The edge of his palm came down in a short, choppy blow at the back of the man's neck and the fellow collapsed. Instantly Celestino swept off the man's sombrero and stepped outside the hut, pacing the post in the same slow manner as the sentry.

The Rio Kid worked swiftly. In the dark, Celestino would not be detected unless Bannion or some of the gunhawks came close, and this gave a few moments of grace. The Rio Kid shredded the guard's shirt, bound and gagged the man. He stripped off gunbelt and bandoliers, took the sheathed knife that hung down between the guard's shoulder-blades.

The Rio Kid rolled the man into a far cor-

ner, then moved to the door. He handed the rifle and extra shells to Celestino, who never once broke the slow pace of his patrol. The Rio Kid spoke in a low whisper that did not carry four feet away.

"This is the biggest gamble now, amigo," he said. "If yuh get in trouble, break for the edge of the village. I'll have Saber in a few minutes and mebbe another hoss. With luck, we'll carry this off."

"Vaya con Dios," Celestino whispered, and the Rio Kid slipped out of the door.

He rounded the corner of the adobe and crouched there, senses strained for sight or sound of danger. In a moment he moved on into the darkness. The village was a small, miserable huddle of huts and in a few moments he was beyond the last hovel.

CHAPTER XIII

Race for the River

KEEPING on out into the desert until the village was only a blur behind him, the Rio Kid hurried on. Then he stopped and whistled, a quick, ascending succession of notes. He waited, then whistled again. He waited a longer time.

He heard a soft neigh, then a riderless horse came trotting up out of the darkness. Saber nuzzled the Rio Kid, snorting softly in evident pleasure. The Rio Kid stroked the soft muzzle.

"I knew yuh'd be waitin', Saber," he mumbled.

Swinging into saddle, he headed back toward the village. He made a cautious circle of the place and at last saw a dark corral at the far end. He worked his way to the gate, slipping the coiled lariat from Saber's saddle. There was no guard and it was a simple job to rope an animal for Celestino and make a hackamore. The Rio Kid tied the animal to Saber and again circled the village to a point close to the hut where he'd been held prisoner. He raised his voice in a sorrowful coyote howl.

In a few moments he saw a shadowy movement, then Celestino came toward him at a fast run. The Mexican was but a yard or two from the horses when the Rio Kid heard a sudden, angry shout from the village. A Colt blasted three quick shots into the air.

"Hurry, amigo!" the Rio Kid shouted. "They've found out we're gone!"

Celestino fairly threw himself forward and hurled himself aboard the horse the Rio Kid had taken. Saber wheeled and the two men streaked north, Celestino riding without saddle as though he and the horse were one. More shots sounded behind them but the two men didn't bother to look back. Pursuers would be on their trail soon enough without looking for them.

Celestino's horse soon showed that it could not keep up with the fleet-footed Saber, and the Rio Kid had to slow his pace. Now he took time to turn in the saddle and watch the back trail. For a long time he saw no pursuit, though he didn't allow this to raise his hopes. He had no illusions about Spike Bannion and the whole outlaw crew.

They topped a small slope and the Rio Kid drew rein to give the horses a chance to catch their breaths after the swift climb. He leaned forward, weight on his hands at the saddlehorn while his narrowed eyes searched southward, sweeping the dark horizon. They centered at one spot where a darker shadow appeared against the dull gray of the sandy hills. He spoke calmly.

"Here they come, *amigo*, and I bet you a peso Spike Bannion's right in the front."

"Hah! That bet she's foolish, General! I not make heem. Better we go now, eh?"

"Much better," the Rio Kid said dryly.

They wheeled their horses and raced down the further slope, heading at a pounding pace for the distant Rio Grande. Garrett's men would be near the ford and by now Campbell's Rangers would probably be patrolling and searching the district. If the Rio Kid and Celestino could reach the river, then Spike Bannion's gunhawks would no longer be a danger and a threat.

They reached the level of the long valley and started across it as the renegades topped the rise behind them. The bandits paused there a moment, and then the two swiftly moving dots were spotted. Angry shouts sounded and someone fired a six, though the range was far too long for it to be effective.

The Rio Kid settled more grimly in the saddle, still holding Saber back to the speed of Celestino's mount. They raced onward, the young Mexican urging his mount to greater effort. The ground blurred beneath them as they raced across the valley, and

gradually the far slope came closer. The Rio Kid threw a quick glance across his shoulder.

The bandits had lessened the gap and were pounding on. The Rio Kid watched Celestino slap his horse to greater speed. He looked back again and a worried frown appeared on his face.

The ground sloped upward and Saber took it in his stride. But Celestino's horse dropped slightly behind. The outlaws yelled and a ragged volley came from their sixes. The Rio Kid heard the spiteful spit of lead a few feet to one side. At least one of the pursuers had come close, within six-gun range.

The two men hit the top of the slope and dipped down the other side. For a moment the bandits were lost to sight and then they rolled up over the ridge. The descent had lengthened the distance slightly and the Rio Kid hoped to take advantage of it. Celestino spoke from set teeth.

"Thees horse he's not very good, General. He is give out in maybe short time. You ride Saber hard, eh? Maybe you get away."

"Don't be a blamed fool!" the Rio Kid snapped. "Ride until he drops. We'll figure a play then."

"Hah!" Celestino said. "Then start theenking."

FOR a time there was no sound but the steady soft pound of hoofs in the soft sand. The far end of the valley approached and the Rio Kid searched the crest for some place where both of them could hole up and fight if the need was pressing. A bullet whined close, more power to its drive now. The Rio Kid's head jerked around. Bannion was much closer.

The Rio Kid jerked his six from leather and slapped a shot backward. It must have come close for Bannion suddenly veered his horse and lost ground. The gunhawks swept on, more confident now that they would soon overhaul their quarry.

"Not much longer, General!" Celestino called, his voice sharp with anxiety.

"Head over to the left. There's a bunch of rocks."

"*Si, si.* How far to the reever?"

"Mebbe three-four miles. Too blamed far the way that hoss is stumblin'. Get all yuh can from him."

They veered to the left and hit the slope. Celestino's horse instantly slowed, breathing hard. Once more the gunhawks shouted and gunfire increased. Bullets landed close about the two, kicking up little gouts of dust to either side, singing nastily through the air. Suddenly Celestino's horse stumbled and plunged forward, the Mexican sailing over its head.

Instantly the Rio Kid wheeled Saber and his six-gun licked flame toward the oncoming owlhoots. One of them dropped, a horse went down kicking, and two others tangled with it. The whole cavalcade was thrown into confusion.

Celestino ran forward, still holding to the rifle. He accepted the Rio Kid's hand and stirrup and threw himself up behind his friend. Saber's powerful muscles bunched and the dun raced upward toward the little crown of rocks. Horse and riders plunged into the ring as Bannion's swearing voice whipped some sort of order out of his men.

They came on up the hill, but the Rio Kid and Celestino were ready for them. Rifle and six-gun roared a challenge and the gunhawks faded back despite Bannion's wrathful cursing and urging. For a time at least there was no further attack.

Saber, at the slap of the Rio Kid's hand, had raced on northward, out of the line of fire that would concentrate on the hill. The two companions grimly settled themselves behind the rocks, waiting for the attack that was certain to come. Neither man had any illusions. There were too many pursuers for two men to hold at bay for long, and Bannion would not let his quarry escape alive. It was simply a case of meeting death, taking as heavy a toll as possible before the end came.

"Here they come, General," Celestino said quietly, his voice showing no trace of excitement.

Bannion remained at the foot of the slope but his renegades had spread out and they came up the hill, firing steadily at the rocks. The Rio Kid and Celestino deliberately picked their targets. Two men dropped on the first volley, two more on the second. The rest scampered back down the hill.

They bunched around Bannion and the two men at the crest could catch the murmuring sound of their argument. The Rio Kid ejected more shells from his six and reloaded. His fingers traced along the empty loops and his mouth set.

"Not much more left, amigo. How about you?"

"Ten rounds," Celestino answered. "Por Dios, that weel be ten muy malo gents in

Boot Hill, no?"

"As I figger it," the Rio Kid said, and nodded. "I'll try to match yore tally, pardner. Bannion will shore know he's been in a fight."

"Pryor!" Bannion's voice called from the bottom of the slope.

The Rio Kid did not show himself. "Say yore bit, Bannion!" he called back.

"There ain't no use yuh tryin' to fight all of us," the gun boss yelled. "Yuh ain't got a chance and yuh know it."

"Why not fight?" the Rio Kid demanded. "Yuh planned to kill us anyhow. Come on up and get us."

"We can," Bannion answered, "but yuh got me wrong about killin' yuh. If you and that Mexican give up plumb peaceful, yuh'll be taken back to the village and held prisoner there. Once our job is done at Vinegaroon, yuh won't bother us no more. We can hold yuh that long."

"Do yuh expect me to believe that?" the Rio Kid derided.

"Yuh got my word."

"It's not worth a counterfeit peso, Bannion, and both of us know it. If yuh want us, yuh got to get us—and we're plumb ready."

There was a long silence, then Bannion's voice came, loud and filled with venom.

"Yuh can get ready to shovel coal, Rio Kid, for that's shore where yuh're goin'! Let's get this over, yuh mangy sons—Get that gent —pronto."

THE Rio Kid braced himself and Celestino's rifle steadied down the slope toward the bandit gang. At Bannion's order, the gunhawks started fanning out so as to rush the knoll from all directions at once. The Rio Kid saw the play, and his lips pressed grimly together.

The outlaws paused for a tense moment once they had reached their positions. Neither the Rio Kid nor Celestino fired, saving their bullets for the hot and furious final moments that were soon to come.

One moment there had been silence and in the next came crashing gun thunder. Dark shapes came hurtling up the hill, firing as they ran, weaving and crouching to miss the deadly bullets that swept down on them from above. Men dropped, but the rest came on. Celestino steadily worked the lever of his rifle while the Rio Kid emptied his Colt, reloaded with swift precision and again faced Bannion's men.

This time the bandit-killers would not be stopped. Several dropped, but the rest came on. However, their pace had slowed, no one man willing to face the blasting guns above for long. Still, they came closer and closer to the rim of rocks and the Rio Kid knew that before many minutes the battle would be over.

There was another pause, as the gunhawks gathered their breaths for the last short dash. Suddenly the Rio Kid heard a new sound, the steady pound of many hoofs. He whipped around, staring northward toward the Rio Grande.

A band of riders came sweeping down toward the knoll. For a moment, the Rio Kid thought Bannion had received reinforcements. Celestino also watched, grim-faced, rifle clasped tight, tense. The Rio Kid cautiously raised his head and peered over the rocks. Bannion and his men remained down and by that the Rio Kid knew that the riders coming up must not be of the gunhawk breed.

The horsemen came on, riding straight toward the hill. They came closer and Celestino lifted his rifle to his shoulder, eyes narrowed. The Rio Kid grabbed the muzzle.

"Wait, amigo, until we're shore."

"But if they—"

"Shore," the Rio Kid cut in, "if it's more owlhooters, we're sunk. But we couldn't hold 'em off anyway."

Bannion's loud voice suddenly rapped an amazed and angry order. The Rio Kid wheeled around in time to see the owlhoots break cover and streak back toward their horses. Celestino whooped loudly into the night.

"It is Senor Garrett, General!"

The Rio Kid slapped several slugs at the retreating gunslingers as they raced for their horses and lunged into leather while Garrett's men swung up to the crest of the hill. The Rio Kid waved them on toward the outlaws and they swept on down the slope. Bannion's men wheeled and streaked southward. Guns blasted erratically, then the outlaws were gone.

Garrett neck-reined his horse and came thundering back up the hill. He jumped out of saddle and pumped the Rio Kid's hand. There was a look of intense relief on his gaunt face.

"We been searchin' south of the river," he said. "Then I heard the gunfire over here and I figgered it'd be worth lookin' into. My hunch proved plumb right."

The Rio Kid touched the remaining few shells in his loops.

"Yuh shore saved our scalps, Pat. How did yuh happen to be below the river in this direction?"

"We found Jack Edwards yesterday," Pat said. "He was shot up pretty bad and he'd dragged hisself over half of Mexico, I reckon. He told us about the gun trap."

"Bannion said he was dead!"

"They thought he was and let him lay. But Jack made it to the river. I turned him over to Tom Campbell who'll take him to Vinegaroon. We started huntin' south then . . . Say, yuh want we should chase them snakes into their holes?"

"Better not." The Rio Kid shook his head. "Bannion has more gunmen he can call on. Yore boys would be cut to pieces. We better head for Vinegaroon."

The Rio Kid whistled and waited, whistled again. Saber came trooping up. One of Garrett's men helped Celestino up behind him and the cavalcade rode northward toward the Rio Grande.

CHAPTER XIV

One Day

EARLY the next morning the men who had escaped death in Mexico, came to Vinegaroon. One of the first things the Rio Kid noticed was that Morton Abbott's railroad car was again on the siding. Before calling there, though, or going to the hotel, the Rio Kid went to Edwards' home. The young contractor looked pale and bloodless as he lay on the bed. Molly Fair was sitting beside him.

"The doctor probed for the bullet," the girl told the Rio Kid, "and got it. Jack lost a lot of blood, but the doctor is certain he'll pull through."

"I'm shore glad to hear it," the Rio Kid said, in relief.

He spoke a few more encouraging words to Molly, then left. Fatigue and lack of sleep made his eyes gritty and heavy. The bullet tear under the bandage made his head throb. He was glad to get off the sun-blasted street and into the hotel, hoping for a rest at last. But when he opened the door of his room and stepped inside Morton Abbott rose from the chair by the window. The big man's eyes narrowed on the Rio Kid's drawn face.

"Yuh look like yuh've been dragged on a rope," the big Californian commented.

"I feel it." The Rio Kid shrugged. "Had a brush with the warehouse thieves south of the Border."

"Heard about the warehouse," Abbott said soberly, and looked sharply at the Rio Kid. "I reckon it's part of the general plan to wreck the Sunset all right. Gettin' anywhere in findin' out who's back of it?"

"A little." The Rio Kid sank on the bed. He kept his eyes closed as he spoke. "I uncovered the Southern Pacific man in Vinegaroon, but he claims to be innocent of any sidewindin' tricks. Malan was behind the fire. He knew I was ready to crack down on him and he beat me to the punch."

"Malan!" exclaimed Abbott. "Yuh're shore? He's a tinhorn and gambler but there's no proof that he fired and robbed the warehouse."

The Rio Kid wearily opened his eyes. "When yuh've dealt with owlhoots and renegades as long as I have, Abbott, yuh learn the smell of skunk without seein' the animal itself. Malan is mixed up in that fire business. Bannion run the stole supplies across the Border and we still haven't recovered 'em. May never get 'em back. I'm puttin' spikes in Malan's guns, though. I'll report to yuh about it later in the day. Right now I'm plumb wore out."

Morton Abbott took the hint and left The Rio Kid went to sleep almost instantly, Celestino keeping a quiet guard over the door and window.

A few hours later the Rio Kid awoke. He could have done with more sleep, but he felt immeasurably better, and he knew Celestino also needed rest. The young Mexican's head had no more than touched the pillow than he was sound asleep.

As Celestino slept, the Rio Kid checked back over what he had learned, and made his plans for the next step in fighting the Sunset's enemies. Malan seemed to stand as the key figure. Once the tinhorn's power was broken, the man behind him would be helpless or exposed. Garnet Malan had to go, and the Rio Kid had enough proof to justify the move—Malan's attempt to protect Stamper, Bannion's attack on Bean to get the

henchman released, Bannion's appearance as leader of the outlaws below the Border.

About sundown Celestino awoke, and the partners left the hotel. They went first to Bean's saloon. The old judge was presiding over a court that was trying a man found dead along the tracks. The body had been brought in and Bean had on the table before him a small roll of bank notes and a pocket gun, taken from the dead man's clothing. The corpse lay alongside the bar. Bean glanced up at the Rio Kid, briefly, and then frowned down at the evidence before him.

"This court," he said slowly, "finds the deceased came to his death plumb sudden but by natural means. Howsomever, the deceased was carrying a concealed weapon and that's shore against the laws of Texas." Bean counted the money in the roll. "It bein' against the law, the court hereby fines the deceased forty-two dollars for said crime. Case dismissed and yuh can plant the gent in Boot Hill."

He rapped on the table and arose, pocketing the money and pitching the hideout gun on the back shelf of the bar. He came over to the Rio Kid.

"Let Stamper go and he lit a shuck back over the Pecos," he said. "No more trouble with him, Rio Kid."

"He's just one," the Rio Kid said. "I'm givin' Malan his walkin' papers tonight. He'll have until noon tomorrow to move out—unless he starts trouble tonight."

BEAN whistled soundlessly, tugged at his beard. Then his eyes gleamed.

"I reckon my court's goin' to be mighty busy. Ought to have more beer in for the jury and witnesses, but there's enough rotgut to keep everything oiled."

"If yuh have a court," the Rio Kid laughed. "I don't figger any of Malan's boys will stick around that long. Garrett's due any minute with his men. We'll break the news to Malan right after that."

Just then Garrett came in the door, and Tom Campbell was with him. The Ranger looked worried, though glad to see the Rio Kid. The three of them, with Celestino and Judge Bean, retired to the back room. Campbell instantly swung to the Rio Kid.

"Yuh're poppin' the lid plumb off, Pryor. I got my boys placed so's they can watch things, but I shore like to have a whole company. Morton Abbott is mighty worried what might happen. He told me to see that yuh didn't do nothin' foolish."

"Abbott?" the Rio Kid exclaimed, brows arching. "It's to his advantage that we kick Malan out."

"He's worried about destruction of Sunset property. Don't know but what he's right, at that."

"I'm judge of that," the Rio Kid snapped. "So is Colonel Pierce who authorized me." He smiled a little. "Campbell's ready for trouble, Pat. How about you?"

"Let's go get us a snake," Pat said readily.

Campbell went with them almost to the entrance of Malan's tent saloon, then cut away into the crowd to make sure his Rangers were ready for any trouble that might come up. The Rio Kid, Garrett and Celestino walked into the entrance. A gunhawk spotted them and the Rio Kid smiled tightly when he saw the man rush for the distant office.

The place was going full blast and the three men were hardly noticed by the customers at the bar, the men who watched the cards, dice and wheels. But only Malan's customers failed to notice them. When the three reached the entrance to Malan's office, some of the gamblers and gunhawks were barring the way. The three stopped.

"Tell Malan he'd better see me," the Rio Kid said quietly.

"He's busy," one of the gunslingers said shortly.

The Rio Kid's glance dropped to the man's hand, hovering over his six.

"If yuh touch that Colt, yuh'll be dead," the Rio Kid warned quietly. "Send a man to Malan. Tell him if I don't see him in two minutes, this tent's comin' down around his head."

The man stared at the Rio Kid, then turned on his heel and disappeared down the canvas corridor. He was gone less than a minute when he stuck his head around the fly and beckoned. The gunhawks stepped to one side and the three fighting Sunset men strode with even, firm steps into Malan's office.

Garnet Malan sat at his desk, his chair turned so that he faced the entrance. One hand rested on a six-gun lying on the desk. Four gunhung men slouched against the wall. Malan eyed the Rio Kid steadily, venom showing in his glance.

"Yuh didn't scare me with yore threats, Rio Kid," he drawled. "I'm just plumb curious to know what yuh think yuh aim to do."

"That's said quick enough," the Rio Kid

answered. He looked around the canvas walls. "Yore gunhawks ain't needed tonight, Malan. I advise yuh to keep 'em in hand. The Rangers and my own boys are outside achin' for trouble."

"Say yore piece," Malan snapped. His eyes dropped from the Rio Kid's steady gaze. "I'll decide about my boys."

"All right, Malan. Spike Bannion made a bad slip down in Mexico. He let me get away from him. It's just one of the mistakes you've been making right along. I warned yuh not to get in my way. Yuh have."

"So?" Malan sneered.

"So yuh've got till noon tomorrer to get yoreself, yore gunfighters, and yore equipment out of Vinegaroon. If yuh're found anywheres along the Sunset right-of-way between here and San Antonio, yuh'll be run out. Yuh're through, Malan. Be out of sight by noon."

"Now them's mighty powerful words," Malan murmured. He leaned back, waved his hand toward the gunhawks. "They can blast yuh down where yuh stand, Rio Kid."

"Mebbe," the Rio Kid admitted. "But I'm ready for a play like that, Malan. Yuh want to call the hand?"

There was a long silence. Malan's fingers clenched on the desk and the blood drained from his face. His gunhawks strained forward, ready for his signal. The Rio Kid, Celestino and Garrett waited, no outward mark of strain about them. At last Malan spoke. "Not tonight, Rio Kid. I got me a hankerin' to see how yuh carry out yore threats. Yuh'll find me right here at noon tomorrer."

"Then we just as well have it out tonight," the Rio Kid said. "I can save time."

"Tomorrer." Malan shook his head. "I want all Vinegaroon to see yore bluff called. I'll be here."

"My last warnin'," the Rio Kid said. "Yuh've got one day to make yoreself scarce. I'll not be responsible for you or yore property at a minute after noon tomorrow."

"I'm callin' yuh then," Malan answered.

THE three men wheeled and strode out of the office. The Rio Kid felt the cold, malignant stares of the gunhawks on his broad back and it gave him a crawling sensation. But Malan had been bluffed tonight and the Rio Kid knew it. The tinhorn wanted all of his gunslammers to protect him when he called the final showdown.

By dawn the word had spread everywhere that trouble was brewing, big trouble. Everyone in Vinegaroon knew that Malan's gun law had been challenged, that by noon the man must either get out of town or back his defiance with everything that he had. The grapevine carried the news from tent saloon to general store, from the labor gangs to the busy railroad offices.

When the Rio Kid and Celestino went to Molly Fair's café, they sensed the new tension. It seemed to be in the air as though the town had suddenly withdrawn itself, waiting for the outcome. Time and again the Rio Kid caught curious eyes resting on him, and Celestino grew a little nervous.

"Senor Malan weel not wait, General," he complained. "He is theenk maybe he catch you first, like the warehouse robbery and fire. Por Dios, I am not surprised should we have fight any minute."

"Not this time, amigo," the Rio Kid answered placidly. "Malan can't try any underhand tricks and stay in Vinegaroon. Everybody seems to know about the deadline. Malan has to meet me fair and square then—not before."

"Maybeso," Celestino sighed and his glance searched the crowd, "but I am much happier inside. There is too many weendows and corners where a man can hide and shoot. It is muy malo."

"All right," the Rio Kid chuckled, "let's hide right in here where we can eat while we're at it."

Molly Fair served them, worriedly studying the Rio Kid's face as he ate. He finished and ordered another cup of coffee. Molly sat down beside him and the Rio Kid smiled at her.

"How is Jack?"

"Better, but I should be taking care of him. I'd close the café if I could afford it." She hesitated and her lovely eyes lifted to the Rio Kid's. "I've heard about you and Malan. I'm worried."

"Don't be. Malan's got his orders. He'll obey on his own or be forced to. It's as simple as that."

"It's not!" She shook her head. "I told Jack about it and he's worried. Malan will have every outlaw gunslammer around Vinegaroon to back his play. He'll fight!"

The Rio Kid sobered.

"To be honest about it, I hope he does. I hope he brings in Bannion and all the outlaws. It'll give me a chance to round 'em up

and clean them out of Vinegaroon."

"I've heard talk," Molly said. "Most everyone is betting that Malan stays in Vinegaroon."

"Then a heap of folks are goin' to lose money," the Rio Kid said evenly. "Malan might stay in Vinegaroon, but he'll be planted six feet under if he does. Now it's my turn

vise you. There might be trouble and

p of it. Close this place up and go to Jack. Stay inside and keep away from windows until everything's over."

"Will it be that bad?" she asked.

The Rio Kid shrugged. "Quien sabe? Best be ready for anything, though Malan might crack up and retreat before noon. Still, you do as I say. I don't want to be worrying about you along with the rest."

"I promise. I'll close at eleven-thirty. I'll be with Jack."

"Good. I'll be in here tonight for the thickest steak yuh can cook up."

He and Celestino walked to the door but Molly's voice checked them. She came up to the Rio Kid and placed her hand on his arm.

"Vaya con Dios," she said simply, and repeated, "Go with God."

The Rio Kid smiled and placed his fingers over her hand. He squeezed it then wheeled and walked out of the café.

CHAPTER XV

Deadline

IN ROY BEAN'S place Pat Garrett and Tim Kelly were trying to play double solitaire but were too nervous and excited to make much of a game of it. They dropped their cards when the Rio Kid came in, and followed him to the back room.

"Malan opened up as usual this mornin'," Garrett reported gravely. "I hear a heap of gun wolves have been stragglin' in since sunup. He shore is ready for anything yuh throw at him."

"And that will be plenty, I'm thinking," Tim Kelly put in. "Me bhoys are waitin' and fair achin' to work out their muscles."

Pat tugged at his mustache and paced nervously back and forth. The Rio Kid sat down in a chair and sprawled out his long legs as though he hadn't a worry on his mind. Pat cursed under his breath.

"Do yuh plan to walk into that trap like yuh did yesterday?" he demanded abruptly. "It'll be fair crawlin' with rattlesnakes and other pizen reptiles, plumb inchin' to cut yuh down."

The Rio Kid gave Pat a sidelong look. "Would you back me if I did?" he asked.

Pat threw his long arms wide in a gesture of disgust. "Yuh'd be the biggest fool in Texas if yuh walked in there!" He checked himself, dropped his arms, then shrugged. "But if that's the way yuh want to play it, count me in."

"I knew you'd say that, Pat," the Rio Kid said softly. He shook his head. "We'll not walk in to give Malan any more warnin's. He knows that noon's the deadline. When noon comes, I'll give Tim Kelly the signal. We'll go to Malan's from here, ready for anything he wants to throw at us."

"Now them's mighty nice words to hear," Pat sighed deeply. "I was figgerin' on makin' my will before noon."

The men made themselves comfortable. From time to time, Roy Bean or his son, Sam, would come in with reports about the town. The hands of the yellowed clock slowly made their circuit of the face. At ten Roy Bean stuck his head in the door.

"Thought yuh'd like to know Spike Bannion just rode in town and went to Malan's. Heard Malan ain't had a cent of business this mornin', except for his own breed of snakes."

"Bannion," Garrett exclaimed. "Then Malan shore aims to put up a fight."

"Arragh!" Kelly spat to one side. "Maybe the two spalpeens intend to light out together!"

"Not likely." The Rio Kid shook his head. "Bannion knows he'll be picked up on sight this side of the Border. He won't risk his neck unless it's mighty important."

They settled for another wait and the clock ticked off the long minutes. At a quarter after eleven, Tom Campbell and Morton Abbott came in. The big railroader had lost his smile and his square face was set in grim determination. He came directly to the point.

"Pryor," he demanded, "are yuh shore yuh're doin' right? This can cause the death of many a good man, and who knows where it will end? Those renegades will draw the line at nothing."

"What yuh expect me to do?" the Rio Kid

asked. "Back off, and let 'em run the Sunset into the ground?"

"I don't know—but not this!" Abbott exploded. He caught himself and spoke in a more reasonable tone. "There must be some other way to get Malan out of Vinegaroon if that's absolutely necessary. Mebbe the Sunset could buy him out."

"No!" the Rio Kid snapped. "Once yuh start payin' blackmail or nuisance money to a man like Malan, it never stops. This is quick and shore. Yuh'd better get to yore car and stay low, Abbott."

Campbell sighed from the corner.

"He's right, Abbott. He's given Malan the spur and he can't back down now. Vinegaroon wouldn't hold that tinhorn if he figgered he'd bluffed the Rio Kid. Better head for cover and keep yore head down. The law ain't seein' nothin'."

Nothing was said for a long time, though Abbott kept looking up at the clock. The hand crept around to the half-hour and the big railroader arose. He looked around at the group, saying nothing. He lifted his wide shoulders and dropped them in a token of surrender, then walked out of the room. Pat Garrett slouched back, crossing his legs.

"He acts plumb unhappy. It ain't like he's scared, just that he shore wishes it wouldn't happen."

Campbell lifted his head and nodded. He, too, glanced at the clock and sighed. He slapped his hands down on his knees and, arose, adjusting his gun-belts and pulling his hat brim lower over his eyes. He stared hard at the Rio Kid.

"I'll back yuh the limit, friend. But remember, the Rangers can't destroy no property, even Malan's. But when it comes to straight out gunsmoke, yuh can bank on us."

"We'll need it, Tom," the Rio Kid said. "And yuh'd better keep yore own head down."

"Shucks, a Ranger's got a neck like a giraffe. Ain't no chance for him to duck. I'll go see about my boys before yuh start the ruckus goin'. Good luck, and I hope yuh get yore skunks."

CAMPBELL left and Bean stuck his head in the door.

"The streets is gettin' plumb empty," he reported. "Yuh're goin' to have plenty of elbow room. Sam is workin' hisself to a frazzle pourin' drinks out at the bar. Ain't never been a better day in Vinegaroon!"

"Ten minutes." The Rio Kid looked at the clock. "Pat, get to yore boys. We're not givin' Malan a minute's extra time."

"My boys," Pat said, "can take care of themselves and they know what to do. I'm stickin' right here and I aim to be present when yuh give Malan his walkin' papers."

At a minute before twelve, the Rio Kid arose and checked his sixes, dropping them back in the holsters and adjusting the leather a trifle to his hands. He jerked his thumb toward the door.

"Time's up," he said. "Let's go."

When the Rio Kid, Celestino and Pat Garrett stepped into Roy Bean's big saloon an instant silence settled on the crowd. A path to the door appeared before them. They stepped out onto the street and started down its center toward Malan's big canvas gambling hall. There was not a horse, wagon or person on the street. Some of the merchants had placed thick shutters over their windows. Celestino's bright smile flashed across his face.

"Por Dios, these people theenk maybe bad storm come, eh?"

"Might be," Pat said shortly.

They rounded the corner and saw Malan's tent down the vista of an empty, dusty street. They saw the round watchful faces of men from doorways and windows as they passed. Neither Pat's gun-fighters, nor Kelly's Irishmen were in sight. A man stood before the entrance of Malan's tent. At the sight of the three coming toward him, he wheeled and disappeared inside.

"It's comin'," Pat said from the corner of his mouth.

"If they try to box us," the Rio Kid said steadily, "I'll take the ones in front. Pat, you handle the gunslingers to the left and Celestino to the right. No use wastin' more'n one bullet on one sidewinder."

"Si, si, General," Celestino answered, but Pat only nodded.

They had walked steadily and now were only a few yards from the tent entrance. Gunhung men came out of the tent and formed a silent, menacing line before it. The Rio Kid saw neither Malan nor Bannion. At his slight signal, the trio stopped.

"Malan knows I've come to get him," the Rio Kid said, clipping each word. "Is he afraid to show his face?"

The men stirred and glanced at one another. The Rio Kid's voice had been loud enough to carry to the nearby buildings.

There was a moment's pause, then Malan shoved through the line from the rear. He glared at the Rio Kid.

"It's two minutes past twelve," the Rio Kid said. "I told yuh to be out of Vinegaroon by noon. Yuh've had yore warnin.'"

"I heard a heap of blow and beller," Malan sneered. "I ain't leavin'."

"Then yuh've made yore call," the Rio Kid snapped.

He shaped his lips and made a shrill whistle that keened through the silent street. Instantly a roar sounded from behind the tent saloon and Malan jerked around, stunned surprise on his face. He had obviously expected a frontal assault.

"Blast 'em!' he screamed and dived inside the entrance.

The gunmen instantly faded, hands slashing down to their weapons. Garrett's men came streaming from the buildings on either side of the street. The Rio Kid's sixes cleared leather with blurring speed and he sank into a weaving crouch.

Celestino and Pat faded to either side, their own guns slashing up.

A blast of lead swept down the street as the outlaw gunmen cut loose. The Rio Kid stood with eyes narrowed through the gunsmoke. His sixes bucked back against the palms of his hands as he cut down on the men directly before him. From the rear of the tent came a crashing roar and more gunslammers spilled out of the entrance, fanning out to either side, seeking to box in the three who stood in the street.

They were instantly lanced by the gunfire of Garrett's men, converging from either side. Men dropped, some like empty sacks, others taking mincing steps forward before they sagged and fell.

Lead whipped at the Rio Kid's sleeves. His hat sailed off, but his sixes kept up their steady song of death. When the two in his hands were emptied he jammed them back in leather, whipping out the pair from the shoulder holsters beneath his shirt.

He heard Pat swear and saw the sheriff's gun arm go limp. With a quick flip, Pat pitched his six to his left hand and continued to battle.

Under the withering fire, the hired gunfighters gave ground and soon only a few of them could answer from the tent entrance. That didn't last long, since every law gun converged on the narrow space and it was swept clean.

FOR a moment the gunfire halted, then the Rio Kid clearly heard the roaring wave of destruction that the Irishmen had unloosed on Malan. He heard wood crash and a whole section of the tent collapsing. Muffled cursing and gunshots added to the confusion.

The Rio Kid looked quickly around, ejecting shells from his sixes and reloading with swift, practised fingers. Celestino grinned through a mask of dust, unharmed. Pat Garrett swore as he tried to tie a section of shirt-tail around his wounded arm.

The Rio Kid grimly made a forward signal with his arm and his gunfighters moved toward the tent entrance. At his command they veered from the narrow opening. A dozen knives made long slits in the canvas. Outlaw fire burst out with new fury, the bullets flying blindly through the canvas. The man beside the Rio Kid suddenly made a queer sound and fell against the tent, sliding to the ground. There was a round hole in his forehead.

The Rio Kid dared not order his men to return the fire through the canvas for Kelly's Irishmen might sweep into this section of the saloon at any moment. The Kid and his men could only grimly throw themselves through the shredded canvas, their guns spitting at the shadowy shapes that ducked, shifted and blasted at them. Then a louder crash resounded over the sound of battle and the Irishmen burst into the game room.

Clubs descended on owlhoot heads. Chairs flew through the air and tables splintered and crashed. A flying spittoon shivered the bar mirror, carromed off and crashed into a shelf of whisky bottles. Blue powdersmoke filled the air, choking and blinding. Gun flashes lit the gloom.

The outlaws turned to meet the new threat and the Rio Kid's gunfighters had a momentary chance to catch their breath, then charge down on the knot of owlhooters. They broke, scattering in a hundred directions, fighting, clawing, shooting their way from the tent. In a moment the gunfight was over.

The Rio Kid ran toward Malan's office and found it a shambles. The desk was splintered, the chairs broken. Paper smoldered, caught from a cigarette. A fine rug was cut to ribbons and one whole side of the tent was gone, the remains of the wall hanging in bedraggled shreds from the roof.

Malan was not around, and neither was Bannion. A silent form lay behind the desk

but it proved to be a dead breed, his face even in death showing evil and rapaciousness. The Rio Kid straightened as Pat and Celestino came into the room.

"Malan and Bannion got away," the Rio Kid snapped.

"Then they're done gone from Texas," Pat said.

The Rio Kid shook his head. "I don't believe it. Besides, I want one or the other to find out who has backed this whole deal."

Gunfire broke out from the front of the tent. The Irishmen were still destroying equipment, stock and tent with an unholy glee. Malan would not be able to save a thing and the Rio Kid's promise had been carried out to the letter. Many another saloon owner watched the destruction, tight-lipped, by now thoroughly convinced that the new trouble-shooter of the Sunset lines was not to be crossed.

At the sound of gunfire, the Rio Kid whirled and raced back through the broken game room and into the saloon. Wild Irishmen were hacking at the mahogany bar with axes.

The mirror was a sea of glass shards scattered over the floor, mixed with rivulets of whisky and beer.

The gunfire came louder from beyond the tent and the Rio Kid jumped to one of the gaping holes in the canvas walls. The gunfight, stopped for the moment, had spread out through Vinegaroon's streets. One of Pat's men who had aimed upward toward a window down the street, fired. A man slipped into view, swayed a moment, crashed through glass and frame and tumbled to the street.

"It's Bannion!" someone answered the Rio Kid's swift question. "He's pulled them snakes together and is makin' a fight of it."

"Campbell's Rangers will side yuh," the Rio Kid said to his own men who swept past. "Keep after 'em. Spread the word I want Malan alive."

The fight had spread down two of the streets leading from Malan's place. The Rio Kid narrowly watched the slow, fighting advance of the lawman. He whirled, grabbed Celestino's arm.

"Bannion's somewhere's behind his men, directing this. If we can work around 'em and come up from the rear—"

"Por Dios," Celestino interrupted, "we have heem a snake, hah?"

The Rio Kid cut along one side of the tent, Celestino following. A bullet whipped close and the trail partners ducked. The Rio Kid saw a wisp of smoke from behind a distant barrel and his sixes jumped into his hands. He slapped leaden slugs into the barrel and it broke apart, exposing an amazed, rat-faced gunslammer.

Celestino's slug slapped into the man's chest and he catapulted backward, out of the fight for all time.

THEY reached the next street where it was compartively quiet, though the sound of battle still rolled from beyond the buildings. The Rio Kid ran swiftly, both guns drawn now. They cut between two buildings and over to the next street, thus avoiding any chance encounter and reaching the railroad tracks near Abbott's car. The door was open and no one was around.

The Rio Kid saw this at a single sweeping glance, then raced on. He wondered vaguely where Abbott might be, but dismissed the thought. They paused at the next corner, realizing that they now were at the rear of the fighting enemy line. The Rio Kid's eyes glittered.

"Malan and Bannion won't likely be together," he said quickly. "You and me better split up, Celestino. Mebbe we'll get 'em both that way."

"But, General," Celestino objected, "that ees dangerous. Me, I back you."

"Not this time. Head up this way and I'll cover yuh part of the way. I'll cut down the alley just beyond. Get goin'!"

Celestino shrugged and darted up the street, crouching now and then as he worked his way down the block. The sound of gunfire seemed to swell in volume. The Rio Kid saw that Celestino was well on his way, and he knew the Mexican would take care of himself. Garrett's boys would keep most of the outlaw gunmen nailed down so the chances of the two lone men reaching their quarry was, in reality, fairly good.

The Rio Kid straightened, ready to head for the alley. He froze when a quiet and deadly voice spoke behind him. His hands taloned out over his guns but he checked the motion.

Spike Bannion's calm, sardonic voice held the thin edge of sudden death in it.

"Well, we meet again, Rio Kid. And this time yuh hold the low hole card. In just one second I'm puttin' a slug right through yore spine."

CHAPTER XVI

Pecos Showdown

DEADLY and inexorable, that voice was like a shock of cold water that sent every nerve tingling in the Rio Kid's body. He knew that Bannion meant exactly what he said and that the man's six-hammer was already probably traveling back to snap down on the cartridge.

The Rio Kid took the longest chance he ever had taken in his life. He lunged to one side, twisting savagely to bring his Colts to bear on Vinegaroon's gunboss. He heard the blast of Bannion's six and felt the hot sear of lead across his side.

Then he saw the man himself. Bannion had turned to follow the Rio Kid's lunge. He fired a second time, too hastily, and the lead split the air where the Rio Kid had been a second before.

Smoke and flame belched from the Rio Kid's Colt. He still moved to one side, crouched and low, but his sixes were lined squarely on their target.

Pryor saw dust slap from Bannion's chest as the slugs slammed home. Bannion jerked backward, stunned surprise in his eyes. His spurs tangled and he sat down abruptly, like a clown taking a fall. His guns dropped from his loose fingers. He half turned, and slowly sank down on his side drawing up his knees almost as if he were going to sleep. A shudder shook his body.

The Rio Kid jumped forward and bent over him. Bannion's glazing eyes never saw him but his cynical lips moved uncertainly and his words were little more than a whisper.

"Downed! Me—downed! But still—got hole card. Bridge and—Malan—Abbott." He gasped, shuddered again and was dead.

The Rio Kid frowned down into the dead face until a sudden flurry of gunshots jerked him around. They seemed to be closer. He came to his feet and ran to the corner. He checked himself as a small band of outlaws came rushing toward him. His guns flashed up. The men offered no fight, but scattered, taking to their heels. The Rio Kid sent a slug singing high over their heads to give them an extra burst of speed.

All firing seemed to have stopped in the town. The Rio Kid advanced cautiously up the street and encountered no one. At the next corner he came on a huddle of dead gunmen. Far to the left, shots thundered, then died as though it was the last gasp of gunhawk rule in Vinegaroon. The Rio Kid turned a corner and came on two of Garrett's men walking boldly toward him.

"It's all over," one of them said. "Pat and Senor Mireles are right down the street."

It was finished. Bannion's gunslammers had fled Vinegaroon. Malan's tent was a tattered, smashed ruin. Under Tim Kelly's direction, the dead were being hauled from under the ruins and stretched out in a neat row in the street. Gradually the citizens of the town appeared from hiding, visibly shaken by the gun-storm that had swept over them. Celestino came hurrying up to the Rio Kid.

"General, there ees no one see Bannion and Senor Malan. These bad snakes, she's flew the coop."

"Bannion's dead. I got him. I reckon Malan has long since left to save his own hide."

"Maybeso." Celestno shrugged. "But it be much better if he is over there with the dead ones."

Garrett and Kelly reported. The Irish had lost two men killed and several laid up with gunshot wounds and cracked heads. Garrett's men had suffered most—five dead. It was regrettable but, on the whole, a cheap price, compared to the number of gunslammers Malan had been able to muster. The streets were filled now, but the crowd was subdued. The Rio Kid signaled to Celestino and they cut away toward the railroad tracks.

"I reckon I'd better tell Abbott that the Sunset is safe. He'll be glad to know it."

They came to the railroad car, skirting the curious crowd that had gathered around Bannion's body. The Rio Kid stepped up on the platform and opened the door. Abbott was not around, the car was empty. That worried the Rio Kid and he paced the length of the coach and back, impatient. Celestino sat down at a built-in desk, fingers absently tapping a nervous rhythm. He glanced around the car.

"General," he said thoughtfully, "I would theenk thees Senor Abbott work with the Southern Pacific, no? He ees Californio and he is know some of thees people."

"Yes" the Rio Kid said absently, "but a

man generally works where he gets a job."

"Si, si," Celestino nodded, "But Senor Abbott he is already in California and then he—"

HE BROKE off sharply when the Rio Kid whirled, his face lighted. The Rio Kid stared hard at Celestino and slowly a grim look settled on his face.

"Celestino, yuh've got it! Jermyn told the truth. He had nothing to do with this trouble. Abbott tried to get me to leave Malan alone and it had us all puzzled. Abbott is the power that Malan kept boastin' about. It couldn't be anybody else. That outlaw in San Antonio knew about the job on the Sunset too blamed sudden for any one else but Abbott to be behind it. It's addin' up."

"Then where is Senor Abbott now?" Celestino demanded.

"Bannion mentioned Abbott and Malan when he died," the Rio Kid went on. "He spoke of a bridge as an ace in the hole. Bridge . . . Great gobs of fire! He meant the Eagle Nest Canyon Bridge! If that was knocked out, it would be months before the Sunset could move!"

"Malan is gone from the town," Celestino came to his feet. "He is run away."

"Get Garrett!" the Rio Kid snapped. "And meet me at the livery stable. We've got to get Malan and Abbott before they damage that bridge!"

He jumped for the door and jerked it open, Celestino at his heels. The young Mexican raced toward Malan's tent while the Rio Kid hurried to the stable. By the time he had Saber and Celestino's horse saddled, Garrett and his men had arrived. With only a brief word, the Rio Kid urged Saber down the right-of-way, taking the short cut across the Pecos River bridge.

Seven grim men raced after him, Pat and Celestino hanging close to Saber's flanks. They knew what the destruction of the bridge would mean. It was three hundred feet above the Pecos River, an engineering job of the first order.

If Malan sent it crashing into the canyon, it would take long and weary months for the thing to be replaced. In that time, the Sunset would lose the road building race with the Southern Pacific.

They raced to the approaches of the bridge, Saber gradually pulling out from the rest. The Rio Kid searched for signs of Abbott and Malan, but saw nothing for a time. Then as he approached the long span, he saw a figure come up from below. It was Morton Abbott. The man's whole attention centered on a long coiled fuse.

The Rio Kid urged Saber to greater speed. At that moment, Abbott heard the thunder of hoofs and whirled around. He saw the riders hurtling toward him. He did not move for a split second, stunned with surprise. Then he whipped a knife from his pocket and cut off the fuse. The Rio Kid saw his purpose and his hand blurred down to his holster. Abbott ducked low, scratching a match along a rock.

The Rio Kid slammed a shot at him but Abbott paid no attention to the gout of sand that kicked up at his feet. He lit the fuse and flung it over the edge of the canyon.

He came to his feet and started running, heading away from the bridge at a sharp angle. He jerked a gun from beneath his long coat and snapped a shot at the lawmen. The slug went high. Celestino and Garrett fired together and Abbott spun sideward, his spitting gun sending lead into the sand.

The Rio Kid raced to the edge of the canyon and flung himself from the saddle. Abbott had placed the dynamite down below and, with a sinking feeling, the Rio Kid knew that he could not prevent the destruction of the bridge. He looked over the ledge and saw Garnet Malan crouched by one of the bridge supports, digging in the ground.

He jerked up a bundle of dynamite sticks, the burning fuse almost down to the explosive. He jerked at the packing, almost sobbing in his haste. The Rio Kid froze, for there was nothing he could do. Malan was too far down the steep slope to be reached.

"Throw it downstream!" the Rio Kid yelled.

Malan didn't look up. With a last savage tug, the fuse came loose as the sputtering flame came within a few inches of the dynamite. Malan hurled the sticks far out over the river. They fell, twisting and turning and finally, far below, plunged beneath the water. The fuse lay at Malan's feet and finally sputtered to its very end. The tinhorn shuddered and leaned back against the rock, mopping the sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief. The Rio Kid felt a surge of relief that was almost sickening. He shook it off and leveled his Colt.

"Climb up here, Malan," he called, "and don't try any tricks."

Malan looked up, face drawn and white.

"He'd have blowed me up," he said in an awed tone. "Blowed me up right with the bridge. The dirty sidewindin' snake!"

"Unload yore hardware," the Rio Kid snapped.

Garrett came to stand beside him. Malan hastily flipped his six out of the holster he wore and dropped it to the ledge beside him.

He came climbing up the steep slope and at last stood in the midst of the lawmen, hands held high, trembling with reaction. Morton Abbott was dead, killed instantly by the two slugs that had knocked him off his feet. His body was loaded on a horse, Malan's mount was brought up and the grim cavalcade returned to Vinegaroon.

HOURS later, Malan sat in Bean's back room. Campbell, Garrett, Roy Bean, Celestino and the Rio Kid were there. Malan talked now, all the bravado gone, all his power erased by Abbott's death, his money swept away in the destructive tide of Kelly's Irishmen. He had lost everything and knew it.

"Abbott had stock in the Southern Pacific before he started with the Sunset," he was explaining. "I reckon it wouldn't have made much difference except Jermyn gave him extra dinero for information about the progress on the railroad. Abbott figgered he could play both ends against the middle, drawin' Sunset wages and seein' to it that the value of his stock went up as the Southern Pacific built most of the rails and got the best land subsidies.

"Jermyn didn't know about that and I don't reckon them bigwigs of the Southern did, either. Abbott was out to make a fortune for hisself on his own stock—and I reckon he owned a heap of it.

"He figgered he could get land from the Southern mighty cheap, since he was a stockholder. Every mile of rail the Sunset lost, Morton Abbott made money. He promised me that the Sunset wouldn't trouble me too much, and he said you'd be tied down plenty, Rio Kid. Thats why I figgered I could argue with yuh and make it stick. I made money by sellin' stolen railroad supplies south of the Border. Abbott wasn't out nothin' and he made dinero on his stock."

"It's all over now," the Rio Kid said quietly. "Campbell will take you to Del Rio for trial, Malan."

"Hey!" Bean blustered with a show of indignation. "I got a court here!"

The Rio Kid smiled. "That's right, Roy, but this case will take more'n one law book. It'll take a whole library of 'em."

Bean tugged at his whiskers and his grumbles faded off into silence. Malan wasn't worrying about Del Rio. He stared dully out the window and shuddered.

"He'd have blowed me up!" he said.

By the next morning, Vinegaroon had settled into its routine life and Garnet Malan had been sent eastward to Del Rio where he faced a court and a hangnoose. Vinegaroon would never again be the wild and deadly town it had been just a week before. Its hilarity was subdued, and there were no gunshots. The Rio Kid's clean-up would be fresh in memory until the rails were built westward and Vinegaroon became no more than a heap of abandoned rubble.

The Rio Kid called on Jack Edwards and found Molly Fair and Roy Bean standing beside the bed. Jack greeted the Rio Kid and Celestino with a whoop of joy.

"Yuh're just in time. We need two witnesses to a marriage."

Before the Rio Kid could answer, Roy Bean had hustled him and Celestino to positions around the bed. He whipped out a little black book and quickly read the marriage ceremony. Finished, he beamed at Molly.

"I reckon the judge can kiss the bride. Jack, yuh owe me five dollars and the price of a couple bottles of beer."

Jack didn't answer. He had pulled Molly down and kissed her. Bean frowned and jiggled around. He tugged at his beard and finally motioned the Rio Kid to follow him. Celestino closed the bedroom door, softly. Out in the street, Bean sighed deeply.

"That's gratitude. No kiss, no five dollars, no beer."

"There'll be others."

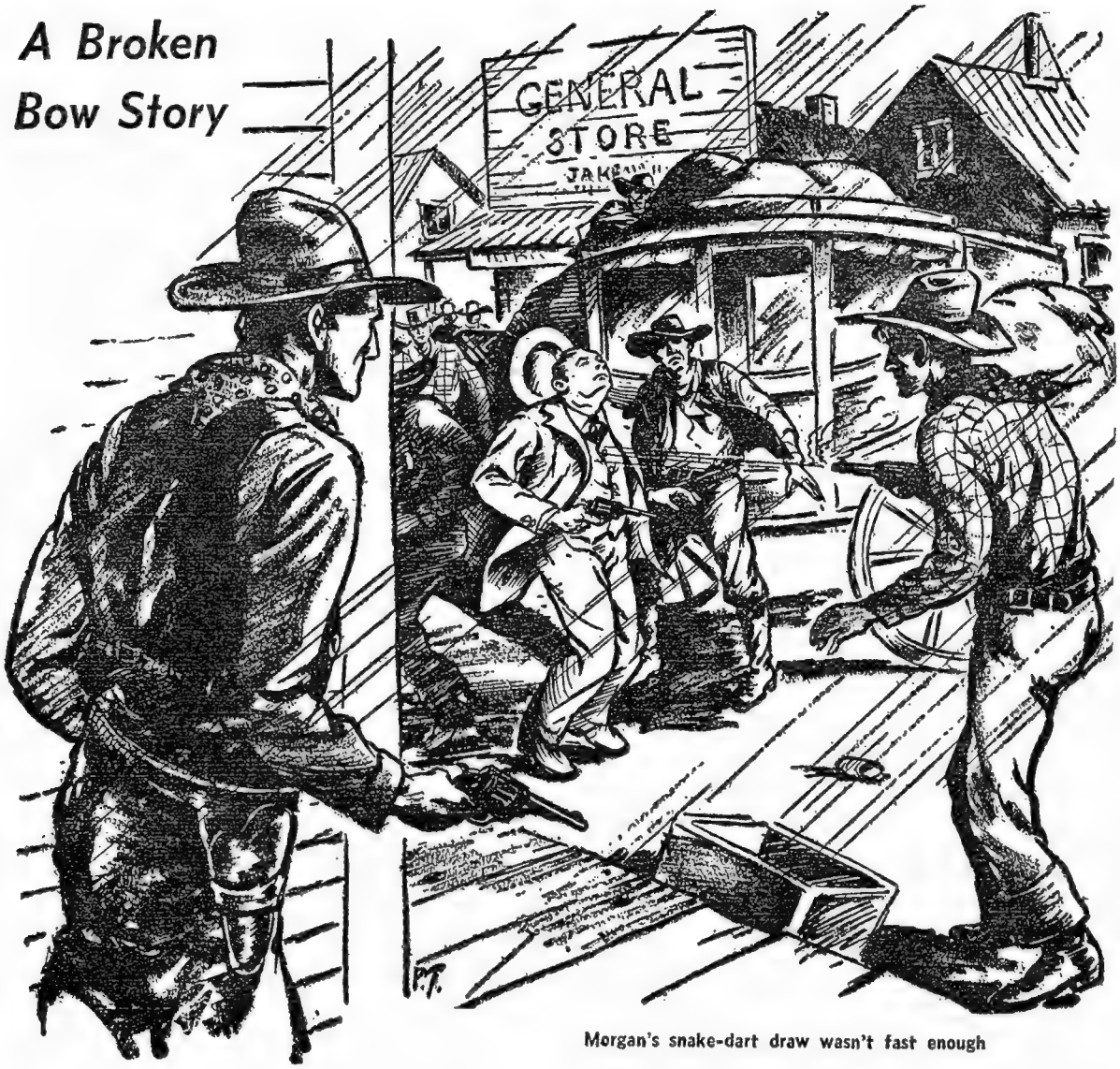
"Not in Vinegaroon. She's goin' to be a ghost town inside a month. Me, I'm movin' to the Pecos Bridge. I'm buildin' me a town and I'll call her Langtry after the most beautiful woman in the world, Lily Langtry. Hey, whyn't yuh settle there, Rio Kid? Langtry will be a big place some day."

"No, Roy." The Rio Kid shook his head. "I reckon our trails part right here. Seems like there's always trouble somewheres for Celestino and me to straighten out."

"Por Dios, that ees right!" Celestino exclaimed. "She is always need for us, no?"

"Always, amigo."

A Broken Bow Story



Morgan's snake-dart draw wasn't fast enough

OWLHOOT HUNCH

By L. ERNENWEIN

Liveryman Dude Mulqueen, retired gunny, thought he guessed right about the Texican stranger — but was in for a surprise!

DUDE MULQUEEN was sitting on the spur-scarred bench in front of his livery stable when he saw a rider come down the east ridge trail into Broken Bow. Another fiddle-footed Texican, Dude guessed. Even a two-year drought on this dried-up range didn't stop Texas drifters from crossing it. Remembering all the strange towns he'd ridden into during the old days, Dude grinned. He'd left some of those towns in a high-tailed hurry.

But the rough-and-tumble times were long gone and Dude Mulqueen was at peace with the world. Like now, as "Parable" Plunket stopped by on his way to the Post Office and announced:

"The Mansion House well has gone dry again—and not a rain cloud in sight."

Dude tilted his dust-peppered derby at a forty-five degree angle, took deliberate aim at a horsefly and drenched it with tobacco juice. Then he said solemnly:

"Sure goin' to be awful tough on the Soto River frogs if it ever does happen to rain again. Whole generations of them poor frogs ain't never learned how to swim."

"This," Doc Plunkett censured, "is no time for jesting," and tromped over to the Post Office.

Mulqueen watched the strange rider come slowly along Main Street. Looked like a drifter, all right.

Like a sashay sport taking a look-see over the hill.

A reflective smile creased Dude's pudgy face. Many the time he had eased into town like that oncoming galoot, with his gun in a greased holster. He'd been a devil-raiser, for a fact—until rurale bullets bored holes in his brisket one moonlight night as he was crossing the Border. A loyal bronc had brought him to Broken Bow more dead than alive, and Parable Plunkett, who was a wizard with gunshot surgery, had saved his life.

Dude told a tall tale of being ambushed by bandits and later, when Fonso Mitchell the merchant offered to grubstake him, Dude felt lower than snake sign in a wheel rut. All the folks on Main Street had been so nice to him that he'd decided to reform his ways and spend the rest of his life in Broken Bow. Fifteen years among honest, friendly folks could sure change things aplenty. They could make a man forget he'd ever ridden with the Wild Bunch.

Dude was thinking about that when Parable Plunkett came back across Main Street, moving so swiftly that the tails of his frayed Prince Albert flapped out behind him.

"It's an outrage!" the pompous old medico declared. "A foul and fantastic outrage!"

"Ain't Sid got the mail sorted yet?" Dude inquired, being accustomed to Parable's bombastic outbursts.

"Read that," Doc ordered and tossed a copy of the Tombstone "Epitaph" into Mulqueen's lap. "It's not bad enough that the perverse antics of Nature threaten our survival in this once fertile region. Now the territorial governor has dealt all Dragoon Basin a dastardly blow!"

"Has he passed a law against rain?" Dude inquired. Then he looked at the paper's front page, his eyes bugging wide as he read:

MORGAN AND RONDEEN PARDONED!

Justice, the blindfolded lady with the dangling scales, was vilely debauched last week when Clark Morgan, erstwhile Broken Bow Banker, and his accomplice in crime, Joe Rondeen, received full pardons from the politician who poses as our governor. These two men, jointly convicted of murdering Tate Lambert, were sentenced by Circuit Court Judge Smith to serve fifteen years at Yuma Prison after a jury of twelve upright citizens found them guilty as charged. The evidence against them was conclusive beyond the shadow of a doubt, yet in spite of that, the governor used the pretext that the verdict was prejudiced because Clark Morgan held over-due mortgages on several members of the jury.

Thus, in one foul stroke, convicted murderers were absolved of their heinous crime and the honest citizens of Broken Bow were branded with betrayal of their solemn oath. It is little wonder Judge Smith has declared that in Arizona Territory it is safer to kill a man than to steal a steer!

FINISHED with his reading, Dude Mulqueen handed the paper back to Plunkett. For the first time in years a worried frown marred the well-scrubbed shine on Dude's face.

"It looks bad for Broken Bow," he muttered. "Yuh reckon Morgan will foreclose them mortgages soon as he gets back?"

"Of course he will," Plunkett proclaimed.

As if in dramatic confirmation of that opinion, Fonso Mitchell hurried across Main Street's wide dust.

"Here's a legal notice from Morgan," he announced, "signed and sealed in Tucson, warning me of mortgage foreclosure upon demand!"

Close behind the old merchant came Fritz Elmendorf, proprietor of the Fancy Lady Saddle Shop.

"It iss impossible," he complained "for me to pay Clark Morgan until my customers pay their bills!"

"And they can't do that until they drive their beef to Bowie—which means another month at least." Mitchell muttered hopelessly. "Morgan has us nailed to the cross. A week from now it'll be The Morgan Mercantile, The Morgan Hotel, and the devil knows how many more places he'll grab."

Afterward, while other men grimly called for their mail and received the dreaded notices, Dude Mulqueen sat on his bench, sadly sharing the bitter sense of futility and

frustration which assailed his friends. Even though Morgan held no mortgage against Dude's ramshackle livery, which was next to worthless, the impending disaster had very personal implications. Mulqueen wouldn't want to live in a town dominated by the rapacious, hog-jowled banker. Broken Bow would be just another wide place in the stage-road without the tried but true friends whose generous good-will had given him a new lease on life fifteen years ago.

So deep and dismal was the run of Dude's thinking that he ignored the strange rider's presence completely until the Texican unsaddled his horse.

"What stall yuh want me to use?" he heard a voice ask.

Then Mulqueen looked at the stranger's face for the first time—and sensing something familiar about it, wondered where he had seen him before. There was a fleeting moment when Dude thought he might have met this bleak-eyed man while riding with the Wild Bunch. The Texan had a wary, trail-smoke look about him and he was wearing a Walker model Colt in half-breed holster—a gun made for men who knew how to use a gun. But almost at once Dude decided he'd never seen this galoot in the old days. The drifter wasn't more than twenty-five, which meant he'd been a slick-eared kid of ten when Dude was fancy-dancing down the back trails.

"Use that first stall beyond my tackroom," the liveryman said.

The stranger put his horse away and joined Mulqueen on the bench. But he didn't offer to talk. He took out a knife and proceeded to pare his fingernails, glancing frequently at various establishments along Main Street. Dude thought he looked longest at Morgan's locked bank. Presently, when the drifter sauntered over to Lee Sing's Shanghai Cafe for supper, Dude saw him glance through the bank's cobwebbed front window.

Which was when a hunch hit Dude hard as the kick of a long-yearling calf.

"By grab!" he exclaimed, and hurried into the barn for a look at the Texan's horse.

If his hunch was correct, the bronc would probably be wearing one of those curlycue bug brands the Mexicans used below the Border.

Dude peered at the stranger's horse, a short-coupled dun gelding built close to the ground. No mark on his left hip, nor his right one either, far as Dude could make out. But it was after sundown now, and almost dark in here, so Mulqueen got the lantern which hung in the barn doorway.

No telling where a Mexican might brand a horse. Could be so high on the hip you'd have to be hossback to see it. Mebbe right or left shoulder, or near anywhere except on his tail. Dude lit the lantern, went back to the stall and presently loosed a satisfied sigh. There it was, all spraddled out like a drunkard's dream, on the dun's left shoulder—a sort of squabble-o-and-slash design that no brand inspector would even attempt to untangle.

Smilingly, in the fashion of a man at peace with the world, Dude went back to his bench. If his hunch was right there'd be a good chance to save his friends from Morgan's mortgage foreclosing. Of course there was still no real proof that he'd tallied the drifter correctly.

Just because a man rode a bug-branded bronc didn't mean he was a bank robber. But that fact, added to the back-trail look of him and the way he'd sized up Morgan's bank sure gave a galoot a right to guess, and to do a mite of planning. For if the Texican was bent on committing larceny in Broken Bow, Dude intended to have it done in the right place.

IT WAS almost dark when the drifter came out of the Shanghai Cafe. Dude watched him close, wanting to observe if he gave the bank another look-see. And was disappointed when the stranger walked past the building without so much as a side glance. But presently, when the Texican sauntered up to the bench and sat down he asked a question that boosted Dude's hunch aplenty.

"I heard in Tombstone yuh had a sheriff here. Ain't he in town?"

"So that's it!" Dude thought. "He read that piece in the paper and figgered to tap Morgan's bank before the big buzzard returns."

"Well," Mulqueen replied, hastily searching for the right words, "we got a windbroke old codger named Sam Odegarde who passes hisself off as a sheriff but he's up in the Fandango Hills helpin' with the beef gather."

"So?" the stranger mused. Then he asked, "Sort of early for beef roundup, ain't it?"

"Yes—and no," Dude hedged. "It's early by the calendar, but too darn late other ways.

It ain't rained around here for so long that the gophers have set up housekeepin' in the Soto River bed. The cowmen kept hangin' and rattlin' with the idea it would rain if they waited long enough. But it didn't and now they've got to drive their cattle to market while the critters are still able to walk. They'll probably make it, and pay off the bills they owe here in town but not in time to save several friends of mine from losin' their places to Clark Morgan."

The Texican shaped up a cigarette and lit it, his frowning face showing briefly in the match flare.

"Morgan," he muttered, "should've been hung instead of being put in prison."

"That's what a lot of us thought at the time," Dude agreed, "but even so we never figgered he'd get pardoned—him and his paid killer." Then, wanting to get the talk back to the important subject, Mulqueen declared, "Nobody in this town has any cash money on hand. Every time a cowman comes to town he eats on credit at the Shanghai, drinks on credit at the Alhambra and buys his provisions the same way at the Mercantile. The only hard cash in Broken Bow is what Clark Morgan left behind him."

"So?" the drifter prompted and it seemed to Dude that he leaned a little closer, as if anxious to hear more about it.

"Yeah, but Morgan didn't leave it in his bank. He's slick—slicker'n slime on a watering trough. He figgered a closed bank would be a big temptation for a robbery, so he put a whole mess of cash money into a bag, along with some mortgages, and turned it over to the Wells Fargo agent here for safekeeping."

Mulqueen took time out to watch Parable Plunkett and Fonso Mitchell cross Main Street on their way to the Alhambra Saloon.

"That Wells Fargo safe don't amount to much," he observed slowly. "I'd be willing to bet the best horse in my barn against a burro that I could take that pinch bar leanin' against the bench and bust the lock off that old safe in ten minutes time."

Whereupon Dude called out to his two friends.

"I'll buy the drinks if my credit ain't played out," he said, and hurriedly joined them.

For upward of three hours, while frowning men gathered at the Alhambra's rosewood bar, Dude listened to the glum talk of his friends. It was as if these men were attending their own wake.

"Tis a sad and sorrowful day," mourned Shaemus O'Shea, dispensing bourbon without benefit of coin.

"Twenty years," Fonso Mitchell muttered, "takin' the dry ones as they came, and never stoppin' a cowman's credit. Now I'll have to start all over again—just because I stood up for the law."

"And it iss the same law Morgan uses to take our places," Fritz Elmendorf reflected.

"If Morgan didn't have them mortgages in his possession he couldn't foreclose 'em, could he? Dude asked casually.

"What a stupid question!" Parable Plunkett proclaimed, hoisting his fifth drink with the dignity of a man two-thirds drunk. "Of course Morgan must possess the documents, otherwise he'd have no legal proof they existed."

"Reckon I better go home and break the news to Ruth," mumbled Luke Medwick, whose wife had recently presented him with his fourth son. "She'll need a tol'able time to pack all the gewgaws she's collected in fifteen years."

Dude left the saloon with Medwick, and seeing that the bench in the livery's lantern-lit doorway was vacant, felt a great surge of exultation. By grab! The drifter might've robbed the Wells Fargo safe already. Might even be hightailing for the tules with Morgan's sack of money and mortgages right now!

REALIZATION of what that would mean to Broken Bow made Dude feel bigger than Billy-be-damn. Fonso Mitchell and Fritz and Luke and all the others could keep their places. They could pay Morgan off when they pleased. And that meant Dude Mulqueen had finally paid off the debt of gratitude he'd owed here so long. Because except for him telling the Texican where the money was, that hombre would've wasted his efforts on the bank. That thought, added to the whisky glow five glasses of bourbon had given him, put a pleasant warmth in Dude. A most pleasant warmth indeed.

"Don't tell yore wife the bad news tonight, Luke," Mulqueen advised. "No use to spoil her night's sleep for nothin.' I got a good hunch Morgan will wait for his money—and be darn glad to get it after beef round-up."

"You drunk?" Medwick asked, eying him as they came to the barn doorway.

Dude smiled slyly.

"Mebbeso," he drawled. "Leastways I ain't felt so good in fifteen years."

That seemed to puzzle Luke Medwick, and he went off down the street muttering to himself. It was just as Dude was about to enter the barn that he noticed the rusty pinchbar leaning against the bench. That startled him. What in blazes had the drifter used to bust off the safe's lock?

Then it occurred to Dude that a bank robber would most likely tote his own tools, and recalled that there'd been a blanket roll behind the drifter's saddle. But in this same instant he saw that the bug-branded dun was still in its stall.

Dude gawked at the dun's rump in wide-eyed astonishment. He shook his head dazedly and glanced into his tackroom. There was the drifter's saddle, upended on the floor!

Dude cursed. What if the Texican was just a cussed drifter, taking a look-see over the hill? Just a sashay sport fancy-dancing through the hills, admiring of his shadows?

With that dismal thought building stronger and stronger in his mind, Dude walked to the Mansion House Hotel and spoke to Johnathan Peppersal, a meek, pursey-mouthed man who'd inherited the hotel from an old maid aunt. "Did a tallish stranger take a room with you?" Dude inquired.

"Yes, indeed," Peppersal said, his Adam's apple bobbing above the loose rim of his celluloid collar. "Another Smith from Texas, so I made him pay in advance."

"Damnation!" Dude blurted. "Blood, fire and corruption!"

Peppersal's fluttery fingers came up in a gesture of excited concern.

"Shouldn't I have rented Smith a room?" he asked nervously.

"You," Dude muttered, "should drink more and talk less."

Like a tired old man he trudged back to his livery and dropped onto the doorway bench. All the glow was gone from him now. All the fine warmth and exultation vanished. Coldness slogged through him like sleet through a wornout slicker. That Texican had sure fooled him aplenty, asking about the sheriff and looking at the bank the way he did. Riding a bug-branded bronc and wearing a Walker model gun, he'd looked like a bank buster from here to who laid the chunk. But he was just another drifter, just another saddletramp making horse tracks in the dust.

Wearily, Dude took down the lantern and carried it into his tackroom. He had one boot off and was tugging at the other when he happened to glance at the dust-covered gun-gear he'd hung on the wall so long ago. Web-spinning spiders had caught countless flies between its trigger-guard and bone handle, and had built permanent nests in the half-breed holster. Looking at it now, Dude recalled his long-forgotten past as he had when he'd seen the drifter ride into town. But now he was remembering something else —the sly statement he'd made out front three hours ago:

"I could take that pinch bar leanin' against the bench and bust the lock off that old safe in ten minutes time."

It wasn't far from Mulqueen's Livery to the Wells Fargo office. But it seemed like a mile to Dude, the longest mile he'd ever walked. Main Street was entirely dark now, not a light showing. Dude strode down the middle of the street, his boots making scarcely any sound in the wheel-rutted dust. He carried the pinch-bar wrapped in a burlap bag, close to his side, so that it wouldn't be noticed if he should meet some homeward-bound townsman.

This, Dude guessed, was probably the first time any galoot ever started out to commit robbery without a gun. But because there wasn't a man in Broken Bow he'd shoot at—not even crusty old Joe Creel, the Wells Fargo agent—Dude hadn't put on his gun-gear. Anyway, no one would hear him if he took his time. Joe Creel would be at his home on Residential Avenue, probably sound asleep by now. The Wells Fargo office was far enough from the Mansion House so that there was slight chance of him disturbing even a light sleeper there.

Dude was passing Pelky's Barbershop when the clock atop the court house belfry bonged out the hour. Two A. M. Somewhere in Burrow Alley a dog began barking, and when Dude crossed the intersection of Fremont Street he noticed that a light was burning in one house on Residential Avenue. A soft breeze swept down from the Fandango Hills. It seemed to have a smell of rain in it, but because Dude's mind was set on the task ahead, he paid that notion slight heed.

He was within a hundred feet of his goal when a thought came to him that made him halt at once. Even though Sheriff Sam Odegarde probably wouldn't suspect him of this job, Wells Fargo would send a de-

tective here *muy pronto.* That outfit was touchy as six snakes at skin-shedding time. They'd spend a thousand dollars to get back ten that was stolen from 'em. And if their detective happened to be an old-timer from Texas he might recognize Dude Mulqueen as being a member of the old Wild Bunch!

For a long moment then, Dude stood undecided. Until he recalled how his friends had looked and talked over there at the Alhambra Saloon tonight. Fonso Mitchell who had seemed to age in a few hours' time. Luke Medwick, who had dreaded to break the news to his wife And her with a week-old baby.

SO Dude shrugged and went on toward the Wells Fargo office. Fifteen years, he guessed, had changed his looks along with his ways, and there wasn't much chance an outside lawman would tally his past. What chance there was he'd take, by grab—and to blazes with it!

"Who's there?" a voice called sharply. Joe Creel's voice!

It came from directly ahead—from the Wells Fargo doorway.

"Speak up—speak up!" Creel commanded. "I got a gun and I'll use it!"

"It's me, Joe," Dude replied hastily, and wondered why in tarnation Creel was here at this time of night.

"I thought yuh was somebody else, Dude," the agent explained. "I thought yuh was that tough-eyed drifter that rode in just before dark. I figgered he might be a bandit, and that's why I'm here."

Dude loosed a long sigh.

"I was wonderin' about him myself," he observed. "Couldn't seem to sleep." He forced a fake yawn and added, "Guess I'll go give it another try."

The trip back to his livery seemed a lot shorter to Dude Mulqueen. But presently, when he pulled off his boots and glanced at his gun-gear again, an idea came that made him curse aloud, and lay for hours without sleeping. An idea that seemed fantastic, yet so simple that it would almost surely save his friends from ruin—if he'd pay the price it cost.

Dude was still thinking about that price when he finally went to sleep. It was the first thing he thought of when he awoke next day to find he'd slept until nearly noon.

The drifter was sitting on the bench when Dude came out of his tackroom.

"Fed and watered the stock," he reported, idly paring his nails.

"Much obliged," Dude muttered.

He noticed that the drifter had shaved and put on a clean shirt, thought he didn't look so tough. In fact he didn't look tough at all, now that Dude knew he was no bank robber. Yet there was something remotely familiar about the Texican's face.

Dude ate dinner at the Shanghai Cafe and tried to ignore the fantastic scheme which kept nagging his mind. Heck, he told himself, he'd tried to pay off his debt of gratitude last night. It wasn't his fault that crusty old Joe Creel had spoiled his efforts. Besides, there was no telling just when Morgan and Rondeen would return. They might be on today's stage, or they might not come for a week.

The smell of rain was strong in the sultry air when Dude sauntered back along Main Street, prying at his teeth with a toothpick. Thunderheads boiled above the Fandango Hills and the aromatic odor of wet greasewood rode a rising wind.

Fonso Mitchell stood on the Mercantile stoop, gazing at the cloud-filled sky.

"Looks like the real thing, this time," he predicted. But there was no cheerfulness in his voice. "Rain won't help us here, when Morgan comes back," he added. "And I've got a hunch he's coming today."

All along Main Street it was the same. Men looking glumly at the thunderheads, when they should've been smiling in anticipation of rain. And it was the same with Dude Mulqueen. Even though a good downpour would fill waterholes and save what remained of summer graze, it wouldn't help his friends here in Broken Bow. It'd just mean that Clark Morgan would take over in time to reap the benefit.

Dude cursed to himself. He couldn't sit by and see Morgan ruin this town, even though his scheme meant he'd have to leave Broken Bow. Even if it meant taking up the renegade ways he had discarded here fifteen years ago!

Reluctantly, in the fashion of a man doing a dreaded chore, Dude made his preparations. Taking a blanket from his bunk he stowed his few personal belongings in it and rolled it behind his saddle. Then he buckled on his gun-gear. If Morgan and Rondeen returned today there'd be two men in town he could shoot at—two snakes that needed stomping for what they'd done to Tate Lambert.

According to the court-house clock the stage was due any minute. Dude took a final look at the tackroom which had been his abode for so long. This, he reflected, was probably the last real home he'd ever know. And he'd be leaving the only real friends he'd ever had when he left Broken Bow. There was a slogging regret in him when he led his horse through the stable's rear doorway and climbing into saddle, rode slowly along Burro Alley.

A steadily rising wind swept up dust and rattled tin cans in this trash-littered lane. It felt cool against the back of Dude's neck. There was rain somewhere behind the wind. Probably raining in the Fandango Hills right now. But Dude took no pleasure in that thought at all. He was calculating the moves he would soon have to make.

First thing was to reach the passageway between Fritz Elmendorf's saddle shop and the Wells Fargo building, without being seen. Then he'd have to wait until Clark Morgan got the money-bag from Creel. The banker, Dude guessed, would lose no time repossessing his money and mortgages. He'd probably start his backhanded foreclosure deals without delay. He was that kind of a coyote.

DUDE dismounted behind the Wells Fargo office and tied his horse to a stoop post. He was easing between the buildings when he heard the stage rumble into town from the west. If Morgan and Rondeen were aboard, this deal would be soon over.

Almost at once Dude heard the creak of the Concord's brakeblocks and knew it had stopped. Then he heard Morgan's voice.

"You ready to pay off, Mitchell—you and the others?" the banker called out.

There was no reply, and Dude guessed that Fonso had merely shook his head, for Morgan's loud voice came again.

"I'll be right over with the mortgage, and Joe will act as witness."

That declaration was followed by Rondeen's gloating laughter and his warning:

"Anybody thinks he can't foreclose them mortgages *muy pronto* better have a gun in their fist!"

Dude hurried forward then, wanting to be close enough to make his play the moment Morgan came out with the money-bag. And he'd sure as rain have a gun in his fist when he stepped out onto the sidewalk, just like Rondeen had suggested. After that it should be simple. He'd cover the two ex-convicts with his gun and make 'em hand over the bag. Then he'd hightail for the tules. The thought that he'd never dare set foot in Broken Bow again made him curse softly.

Of course Morgan and Rondeen might decide to fight. In which case he'd live long enough to cut down the hog-jawed banker.

So thinking, Dude drew his gun and was in the act of taking his first look at the street, when he heard a voice call sharply:

"Just a minute, Morgan!"

That voice sounded strange to Dude. He couldn't identify it, until he looked around the building's corner and saw the Texas drifter ten feet away—with his right hand hovering close to holster!

"Who the devil are you?" Morgan demanded, a scowl rutting his untanned face.

The drifter ignored that question. Instead of answering it he asked one of his own.

"Are you Clark Morgan?" he inquired.

"I am—if it's any of your goldarned business," the banker declared arrogantly.

The Texican glanced at Rondeen.

"Are you Joe Rondeen? he asked curtly.

"Yeah—and who in Hades are you?" Rondeen asked.

"Name of Lambert," the drifter announced. "Tex Lambert—brother of the man you murdered."

Dude Mulqeen gulped, and stared, and knew suddenly why the Texican's face had seemed familiar. And in this fleeting instant of realization he heard Tex Lambert say softly, almost whisperingly:

"You two should've been hung for killin' my brother in cold blood. Now I'm givin' yuh ten seconds to beat my draw."

For a strangely suspended moment Dude thought neither Morgan nor Rondeen would make a play for their guns. They stood stiff and unmoving, like men frozen beyond the power of movement. And in this hushed interval came Tex Lambert's measured counting: "One—two—three—four—"

Then Clark Morgan grabbed for his shoulder-holstered gun.

The rest of it was almost too fast for Dude to follow. Though Morgan's draw seemed snake-dart fast, Lambert's gun blasted first, driving a slug into the big banker and knocking him back. Lambert fired again, and Dude saw the upward arc of Joe Rondeen's gun halt abruptly. The lath-lean killer took three mincing steps sideward, tripped over Morgan's sprawled body and fell face down.

Which was when Dude noticed that it was

raining—hard.

Afterward, when Tex Lambert had ridden off on his bug-branded bronc, Dude Mulqueen stood with Parable Plunkett in the stable's lantern-lit doorway and watched sheets of rain form puddles in Main Street.

"My hunch about the drifter was half right, anyway," Dude mused.

"What are yuh mumblin' about?" Plunkett inquired.

"Just an owlhoot hunch," Mulqueen replied dryly.

It was almost dark as night now, but Broken Bow had never looked brighter to Dude Mulqueen. Lamplight glowed cheerily from doorways where men stood watching the rain with smiles on their faces. The long drought was over. The threat of foreclosed mortgages was gone. And Dude Mulqueen was still here in Broken Bow, where he belonged. Just thinking about it made a feller's throat feel lumpy.

"Why," Parable Plunkett demanded, "are you standing there with tears in yore eyes?"

"I was thinkin' about them poor Soto River frogs that ain't never learned to swim," Dude drawled, wiping his eyes. "They'll all drown sure as rain."

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"Stand back, McCann!" the Rambler ordered

FORTY-DOLLAR SCALP

By BILL ANSON

Rambler Smith meets up with a tricky rancher!

BEFORE two red suns had set behind the timbered ridge overlooking the Rocking W spread, the Rambler knew that his next forty-dollar pay was to be the hardest earned money of his entire life—if he lived to collect at the end of the month!

"So you're just a wandering cowpoke headed up to Montana with the summer breeze," Rancher Sam McCann had said knowingly to the Rambler's request for work. "You figure I might use you until my other hands come back from the trail-drive to market. Then you aim to collect and be on your way. That might suit me just fine. What's your handle?"

"Ram Smith," the Rambler had replied uneasily. "I guess I got the nickname from just ramblin' around. It ain't that I don't like stickin' in one place for long. It's because I want to see the world before settlin' down for good."

He was a curly-headed eighteen-year-old, with clear blue eyes and a firm jaw, but his cheeks were pinched from lack of good grub and he needed about twenty pounds more of weight to give him a full man's strength. His levis were shrunk tight to his long thighs, his brush-jacket was torn, his ten-gallon hat faded and cracked. Although the Colt holstered low from his right hip was clean, the walnut handle was worn and there were not a half dozen brass cartridges in his belt loops.

"You'll see plenty of the world on the Rocking W, younker," Sam McCann had chuckled. "Go out to the corral and break that big bay critter before you eat. What's more, I don't like strangers packing artillery, so hand your shootin'-iron over to the cook when you come in. Quit before the first of the month, and you get nothin'. That's all. Get to work."

McCann had turned and gone into his cabin, as if not caring whether the Rambler forked his pinto bronc and cleared out or remained to break the wild bay in the corral. A big man, dark of face, with massive round shoulders, and the slim hips of a rider, McCann was capable of thrashing the four hands left behind at the bunk house, all at one time in a knock-down-drag-out scrap. Yet they were a tough quartet, wearing low-slung guns, and as suspicious of Ram Smith as lion

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hounds are of a stray pup from town.

It was the Rambler's first ride on the sunfishing, buck-jumping, crow-hopping bay cayuse that held the bark and bite of the four regular punchers. They stood about the corral watching him stick to the saddle like a cockle bur, never using his spurs or quirt, trying desperately to gentle the mad bronc to the weight of a rider. If any hombre ever earned a meal, the Rambler earned his first supper at the Rocking W.

He hadn't liked surrendering his Colt, but he needed forty dollars badly to be on his way.

"Mac says for you to break the black and the sorrel this morning," Jack Roach, a sour-faced puncher with shifty black eyes, told the Rambler the next day. "And this afternoon you can try those two mavericks we have penned up behind the barn. We all have got some branding to do in the lower pasture, so you can ask the cook to help you saddle."

THE Rambler was no fool. He knew that a bronc stomper earned ten dollars a ride on an unbroken cayuse. Sam McCann was getting fifty dollars work out of him for three meals of time. At the rate the rancher was piling the chore on, Ram Smith realized that in the next thirty days he was going to earn every dollar of his forty a hundred times over again.

The third morning found Ram Smith so stiff and sore that it was agony to get his levis and boots on. He had stuck all four broncs, but it had nearly ruined his insides and left him with a slightly sprained arm. Jack Roach and the other three punchers left him dousing his aching head under the pump. When he reached the cook shack, Ram Smith heard them roaring with laughter, and he wondered if he were the goat of some jest that had been made.

The Rambler soon found out that Sam McCann had let the four punchers in on the chore scheduled for the newcomer on this day.

The rancher spoke across the table as Ram Smith chewed on his cakes and molasses.

"Younker, I want you to find yourself some leather chaps and cuffs in the storeroom," McCann said. "We're going brush-poppin' today after a passel of steers that's been hidin' out down in the prickly pear. Ever do any of that kind of work before?"

The Rambler felt the eyes of the four regular hands upon him, and he saw the snaggle-toothed cook grinning at him through the kitchen door.

"I reckon I'll be able to hold up my end," Ram told McCann quietly, but Ram knew how dangerous the work might turn out to be.

[Turn to page 80]

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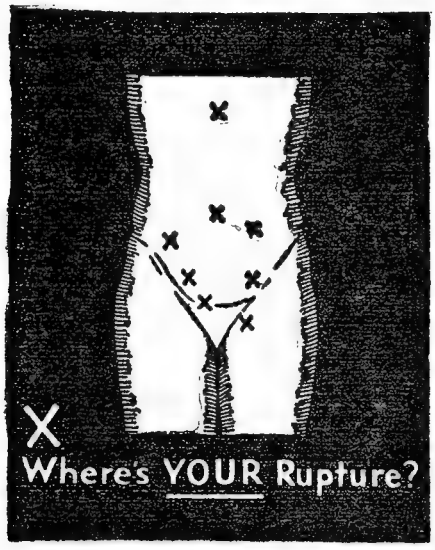

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"We'll see if you can hold up your end," McCann chuckled, and he winked at the other men. "You've got nothing to be scared of. I'm givin' you working clothes and a good cayuse to ride. But if you want to use your own pinto, that's up to you."

The Rambler's eyes flashed. He knew that Sam McCann didn't want to lose one of his own ponies. McCann was trying to hook Ram Smith into risking the pinto that the Rambler owned.

"You mean that you want to hire my pinto as well as me?" Ram Smith asked quietly.

McCann's eyes narrowed.

"Hard tellin' what the hammerhead is worth for the day," the rancher temporized. "But we might set a price after we see what the cayuse kin do, if that suits you."

Ram took a swig of coffee to settle his churning innards.

"What the pinto is worth suits me for price," the Rambler said. "I've heard of cases where a hoss is worth much more than a man."

Sam McCann roared with laughter. "Har, har, har! That's a good one! You figure that snake-eyed pinto is worth more than your own self! Mebbe you're right, younker, because you ain't much good. Har, har, har!"

The Rambler rode his high-stepping pinto cayuse on the way down the grassy range to the banks of the Little Sandy River where the prickly pear grew as thick as chaparral. Sam McCann was aboard a big black horse with nervous red eyes, a trained cutting bronc that could be counted upon to take care of itself. Jack Roach forked another trained cutting bronc, and the three other hands were well saddled. The snaggle-toothed cook followed with a Winchester cradled in his arm. The cook was apparently McCann's bodyguard. Ram Smith wasn't sure but hidden in the hash-slinger's dirty shirt was Ram's Colt six-gun.

"If I get killed," the Rambler told himself, "they aim to leave my Colt beside me so it won't look like I was unarmed in the pear."

A mile from the slow-winding river, Sam McCann pulled up his black bronc behind a grassy knoll and turned in the creaking saddle to speak to the Rambler.

[*Turn to page 82*]

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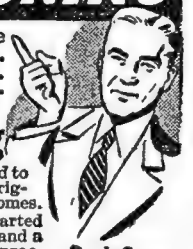

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"There's a big Brahma bull lost down in the pear," McCann said casually. "The critter usually waters about this time with some cows. I want you to some around through the prickly stuff and get between this bull and the water. The bull knows the river is full of quicksand, so he won't try to cross. He'll make a run for the pear."

The Rambler's face was tight and cold. He understood now why he had been hired at the Rocking W. Tackling a proddy Brahma bull was as dangerous as trying to rope a grizzly with cubs. Good Brahma bulls were worth a small fortune. If by some great stroke of luck Ram Smith could trip the Bull with a rope and hold the critter down until McCann and his hands arrived, the rancher stood to make a gain that he had most likely been working to get for more than a year.

"I'll risk my pinto," the Rambler said quietly to McCann, and the rancher's face flushed.

RAM SMITH turned and rode off at an easy trot, keeping the grassy knoll between him and the river. He took a deep swale to keep below the skyline and tested the wind with a wet finger. He was no tenderfoot when it came to chousing stock from pear. He had been born on a Border ranch and knew all the in's and out's of mesquite runs. His pinto was not a big animal, but it was as quick as a fox on its feet.

As the Rambler swung far around the prickly pear, and then turned into a sandy runway through the thorny growth, he felt the pinto tighten up under him. The horse sensed what was expected. Dropping its head, the bronc began eying under the branches for sign of the dangerous game. Ram let the horse have its head. He played out the loop of a lariat and let it trail from his right fingers.

"This is gambling with scalps," the Rambler said to himself. "Sam McCann took chips in this game against my life and the life of my pinto. He's going to pay for those chips if he wants his Brahma bull. He isn't going to play for nothing. I'd just as soon shoot a cheating tinhorn as not."

The Rambler and his pinto moved from one sandy runway to another through the pear, always angling toward the north and the bank of the Little Sandy River. Up ahead Ram could see the broken sunlight at the edge of the mesquite. He knew he was about to emerge on the flat. His spurs touched the pinto and the bronc sprang like an arrow from a bow.

Ram Smith came out of the thorny thicket fast, his lariat ready for the cast. One hundred yards beyond lay the river with its treacherous quicksand bogs. Between him

and the water lay a half dozen cows. Guarding them was a massive hump-back bull with a span of needle-tipped horns. The Brahma sprang to his feet with a roar of hatred. For a short second, the bull stood poised, then swung its flat-browed head to glance at the river where escape was cut off. Then the animal charged for the prickly pear.

"Dodge him, pinty," the Rambler yelled at his horse, and the pinto drove straight at the infuriated Brahma.

The Rambler could hear the yells of Sam McCann and the Rocking W punchers. He was certain they had come over the grassy knoll on the gallop, had seen him caught between the bull and the pear. They were coming fast, and they evidently expected to see the Rambler's pinto on its charging horns and hurl the horse skyward.

But the pinto dodged the bellowing Brahma as quick as a wink, and as the bull went rushing past, Ram Smith whipped his rope under the man-maddened Brahma's front legs. Now the pinto cayuse came to a sliding stiff-legged halt.

Ram Smith leaped from the saddle, pigging strings in his hands. He prayed that the lariat rope would not break. It didn't, but it twanged taut like a mighty cello string. Caught by the front legs the Brahma bull went down, nose and horns first into the sand. The bull's hind quarters went up into the air, and the beast went tail over tin-cup into the sky, horns snapping like icicles.

Air whooshed from the bull's lungs as Ram Smith leaped across the sand and hurled himself on the animal's waving front legs. As quick as a trigger, he had the bull's front ankles snubbed in a fancy slipknot. Then Ram turned to the rear legs, snaked them in another professional slipknot, and he jumped back and turned.

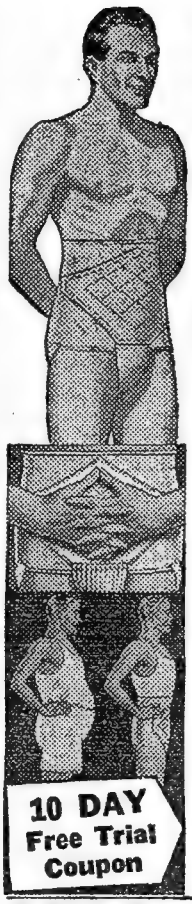
McCann and his hands were piling out of their saddles, ropes in their hands. Their broncs drew back in terror at the big bull's infuriated bellowing. Sam McCann was shouting his victory.

"You got him, Smith! You got him dead to rights! I've been trying to catch that devil for two years! He's worth a fortune!"

The Rambler stood with the end of two long pigging strings in his left hand. His right pulled a small derringer from under his shirt.

"Stand back, McCann, before I release this bull!" the Rambler shouted. "Once I jerk my ties, this Brahma will be on its feet and slaughter the lot of you. You're paying me for the gamble I took, for the chips you stole when you entered this pot. You're paying wages for my pinto who caught the bull. Do you want to live, McCann, or do you want to pay with your life for the punchers that

(Concluded on page 96)



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Larkin howled in pain as his gun dropped from his hand

RIGHT FAIR COWHAND

By DONALD BAYNE HOBART

All braggin' aside, Buck Norton sure has savvy!

FROM the very first day "Buck" Norton joined the Cross-in-a-Box outfit that spring he had the rest of the boys guessing. Norton was a thin, sandy-haired waddy who was a tophand to hear him tell it, and he sure seemed to admire himself plenty, and he wore two guns.

"New man I just hired," said old Lem Hayden, the boss of the outfit as he brought Norton down to the bunkhouse. "Name's Norton, and I'm figgerin' he'll do if he's half as good as he says."

It was right early in the morning and the men had just finished breakfast and were getting ready to ride out and start hunting strays, now that the weather was better. It had been a mean, long winter and spring was plumb welcome. They hadn't made up their minds as to whether they felt the same way about the new arrival.

"Shucks, I was just bein' modest, Boss," said Norton. "There ain't no doubt that yuh'll find me the best man yuh ever had ridin' for yuh."

"Which is coverin' considerable territory, seein' as I been ranchin' for over forty years," remarked the Old Man dryly. "I'll leave heaven's gift to the Cross-in-a-Box for you to take care of, Marty." Hayden glanced at his foreman.

"Bein' nurse to a windbag ain't my idea of how to start the day," drawled Marty Lang, who was a good man but getting a little crusty. "But come on, Norton. I'll show yuh yore bunk and where to store yore warbag."

The ranch owner walked away, and the men headed for the corral to get their horses, leaving Lang alone with the new member of the outfit. The foreman took Norton into the bunkhouse and showed him where he would sleep.

"Looks like I've done it again," Norton said quietly, as he stored his warbag under the bunk. "Just like always."

"Done what?" demanded Lang, looking at him in surprise.

"Got to boastin' about myself," said Norton. "Reckon it is kind of like a kid whistlin' in the dark."

"Hump!" muttered the foreman. "When you start whistlin' yuh shore sound like a steam calliope."

All the same Lang liked the way Norton was talking now, and the foreman got to wondering if the new man might not fit in better than it had seemed first off. Marty Lang knew there were other ways of judging a man besides hearing him talk.

THEY stepped out of the bunkhouse. Norton went to his horse, which he had left standing in the shade with reins dragging. Lang also liked the way the sorrel nuzzled his rider, and the way Norton smiled and slapped the horse gently.

"Turn him into the corral," said Lang. "I'll show yuh the hosses we ain't usin' and

yuh can have the pick of 'em for yore string."

It was quiet now. The other men had saddled up and ridden away. Lang led the way down to the corral and Norton followed, leading the sorrel by the reins. When they reached the gate Norton stripped the rigging off the horse and turned him into the corral.

The sun was warm for early spring, but there was a cool breeze stirring. Lang pointed out the horses that weren't being used by the other members of the outfit. Once the foreman shivered and Norton looked at him in surprise.

"What's the matter, Marty?" Norton asked.

"Had a funny feelin'," said Lang. "Like someone was walkin' over my grave."

Abruptly the foreman reeled back, clutching at his chest. The report of the rifle was like a whip cracking. For an instant Norton stood motionless, staring at the blood seeping through Lang's gray shirt over his heart.

Norton was no fool. He dropped to the ground and edged around so that his saddle protected his head and shoulders as he sprawled behind it. From up on the porch of the ranchhouse a rifle started roaring. Evidently Lem Hayden had seen what had happened and the rancher was trying to get the drygulcher hidden in the rocks.

"I shore joined a nice peaceful outfit," muttered Buck Norton, his expression bitter as he glanced at the still figure of the foreman. He had liked Marty Lang. "Wonder why that sidewinder killed him?"

The man in the rocks had stopped firing. Behind the scattered boulders was a small patch of woods, and it would be simple for the drygulcher to edge his way back through the trees and brush and escape without being seen.

Buck Norton held his Colt in his right hand, waiting, even though the distance from the corral gate to the rocks was right far for accurate six-gun shooting. Up on the porch Hayden stopped shooting, evidently because he couldn't find any target.

It again grew quiet. The horses moved restlessly in the corral, as they sensed something wrong. The sun beating down on Norton's back was hot. He raised his head, and southeast of the woods he spied a horseman riding away in a hurry. The man was too far off to be recognized, even if Norton had known him.

"Reckon that's the drygulcher, and he's gettin' away!" decided Norton as he got to his feet. "I shore aim to find that hombre and give him his needin's."

Hayden came down off the porch, still

[*Turn page*]

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carrying his rifle. Norton knelt and examined the foreman though he didn't have much doubt that Lang was dead. It only took a few moments for him to learn he had been right. He stood up as Hayden joined him.

"Dead?" demanded the ranch owner curtly.

"Yes." Norton nodded. "Bullet got him in the heart. You any idea why anybody would want to kill him, Boss?"

Hayden looked at the new member of the outfit like a man will when he's got something special on his mind. Norton couldn't figure much from the ranch owner's expression.

"I ain't certain that drygulcher aimed to down Lang," growled Hayden. "Happened to be watchin' you and Lang there at the gate, and yuh moved so he was standin' where you'd been when the first shot was fired by that hombre in the rocks."

"Meanin' yuh think the drygulcher was tryin' to get me, but killed Lang instead?" asked Norton, and then as Hayden nodded, "Why?"

"How do I know?" exclaimed Hayden impatiently. "If yuh've got enemies I wouldn't know about it. Help me carry him into the bunkhouse."

They picked up the dead man, carried him into the bunkhouse and placed him on his bunk. Hayden covered the corpse with a blanket. Neither rancher nor waddy spoke as they stepped outside. But Buck Norton was doing a lot of thinking.

The way Hayden talked it sounded like he blamed Norton for the foreman's death, and the waddy resented it. Norton was willing to admit he'd done a lot of boasting in town yesterday to Hayden before the owner of the Cross-in-a-Box had hired him.

MAYBE he had sounded right salty, and told it scarey about the time he had saved an outfit he had been working for from a bunch of rustlers. But Hayden should have known he was just talking.

"That drygulcher wasn't tryin' to get me," Norton said finally. "He meant to down Marty Lang just like he done. I haven't got any enemies or friends around here."

"Get the man who killed Lang and I'll believe you," snapped Hayden.

"Oh, shore," Buck Norton said. "There a haystack anywheres around, Boss?"

"What yuh want with a haystack?"

"I figger I better start lookin' for the needle in it so's to get in practice for findin' the drygulcher." Norton frowned. "Lang had trouble with any of the rest of the outfit lately, Boss?"

"Let's see." Hayden looked thoughtful. "He did tell me he thought somebody was

stealin' money and stuff like that from the other boys in the bunkhouse while they were sleeping at night. Don't believe he knew who it was though."

"Anything else?" insisted Norton.

"Well, Lang did have a run in with Ed Wilson the other day. Lang claimed that Wilson wasn't doin' enough work to suit him, and if Wilson didn't do better Marty was goin' to have him fired."

"Which wouldn't make Wilson love him none," said Norton. "But it don't sound like a killin' matter. Reckon I'll saddle up and ride out and see if I can pick up sign on the drygulcher."

"Go ahead," said Hayden. "I expect some of the men back around noon. I'll have 'em take care of the body then. Reckon Marty would like to be buried right here on the ranch, seein' he didn't have any relatives, and always figgered this was his home."

The ranch owner went back to the house. Norton stepped into the corral. He roped and saddled a roan that he thought Lang had said was one of the horses he could use for his string, and rode in the direction the drygulcher had gone.

As he went on he found the ground was hard, and that the killer's horse had not left any trail for Norton to follow. But he kept on riding. He was approaching the mouth of a canyon when a rider loomed into view.

Norton halted the roan, waiting for the other man to draw nearer. As he came close Norton saw he was a stocky, square-faced man who had been with the Cross-in-a-Box outfit that morning.

"What's the idea?" demanded the stocky man, halting his mount. "Who told yuh that yuh could take my hoss?"

"Lang told me the hosses I could pick for my string, and I figgered this was one of them," Norton said mildly. "If I made a mistake I'm right sorry."

"Lang should have told yuh that Ed Wilson don't let anybody but him ride the hosses in his string," snapped the stocky man. "I'm Wilson—just in case yuh don't know, Norton. Get off that hoss!"

"What for?" demanded Norton.

"Because yuh're goin' to walk back to the ranch," snarled Wilson. "I'll teach yuh to leave my hosses alone!"

"It's been such a long time since I been to school that I don't learn easy," said Norton, his hand close to his gun. "Besides I don't feel like walkin'. Too much of it hurts my feet."

Wilson snarled and dug his spurs into his horse. The bay he was riding leaped forward and would have rammed against the side of the roan, perhaps badly crushing Nor-

[*Turn page*]

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ton's right leg, if he hadn't got his horse out of the way fast.

"Calm down!" he ordered.

Wilson halted his horse when he found Norton was covering him with his gun. The sandy-haired waddy looking hard and tough, and Wilson appeared to be cooling down.

"No reason for yuh to get so proddy," Wilson said quietly. "I was funnin'. I didn't really aim to make yuh walk back to the ranch."

"'Course not." Norton shrugged as he thrust his gun back into holster. "I knew yuh was just hoorawin' me. But what with Marty Lang dead, this ain't no day for playin' games."

"Marty dead?" exclaimed Wilson, in amazement. "What happened? He was all right when we left this mornin'. He take sick or somethin'?"

"A drygulcher killed him," said Norton. "Mebbe we'd better be gettin' back to the ranch."

"Reckon so," agreed Wilson.

They headed back for the ranch riding side by side, making good time, but not running their horses too hard either. As they drew closer some of the other men out of the outfit joined them. Norton told them what had happened.

"Lot of brush country around here," said Norton, noticing the way leaves and briars clung to the clothing of the men. "Must be a job, huntin' strays."

"It is," said a thin-faced man named Dirk Larkin, who was riding beside him. "We been workin' hard this mornin'."

"If you was I shore didn't see yuh do it, Dirk," remarked another member of the outfit. "There was a couple of hours this mornin' when yuh didn't seem to be anywheres around."

"Aw, I was back in the brush," said Larkin, changing the subject abruptly. "And yuh say that if the Old Man hadn't started plugging away at the drygulcher from the porch of the ranchhouse you might be dead, too, Norton?"

"That's right," Norton said.

They reached the ranch and the men of the outfit swung out of saddles. Norton was the first out of leather and he stood watching the other men dismount. His eyes narrowed as he stared at Larkin's levis. They were covered with cockle-burs, even on the seat of the overall pants just below his belt. Hayden joined the other men and they all grew motionless as Norton spoke abruptly.

"Why did yuh kill Lang like yuh done, Larkin?" he demanded. "Was it because he found out that yuh're the one who's been stealin' money and stuff from the other men in the bunkhouse at night?"

"That's a lie!" roared Larkin. "I didn't kill Lang."

"Then how did yuh get them cockle-burs all over yore levis?" demanded Norton. "The other men haven't burs on 'em like that. Their saddles protected 'em. The only way you could have got them was to crawl around in the brush like the drygulcher did."

Sudden panic swept over Larkin and he stepped back as he saw the other men glaring at him. Ed Wilson suddenly reached forward, grabbed Larkin, and searched through his pockets. He drew out a silver watch.

"My watch!" growled Wilson, "Found it was missin' when I got up this mornin', but didn't say anything about it. Shore put me in a bad humor though. Looks like yuh're right, Norton. This is the thief and killer."

Larkin broke away from Wilson and grabbed for his gun. Norton's Colt came up roaring. Larkin howled in pain as a bullet hit his arm, and his gun dropped.

"Looks like yuh'll make a right good hand at that, Norton," commented Hayden. "Providing yuh don't tell us so too often."

"Not me," said Norton. "Yuh know that was a right good shot—but I've done better. Yuh take one time down in the Panhandle country—" He smiled and stopped. "There shore is a lot of wind around here."

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933, of Rio Kid Western, published bi-monthly at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1945. State of New York, County of New York, ss. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared H. L. Herbert, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of Rio Kid Western, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Better Publications, Inc., 10 East 40th St., New York, N. Y.; Editor, G. B. Farnum, 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y.; Managing Editor, None; Business Manager, H. L. Herbert, 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Better Publications, Inc., 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y. N. L. Pines, 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are none. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. H. L. Herbert, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 1st day of October, 1945. Eugene Wechsler, Notary Public. My commission expires March 30, 1946.

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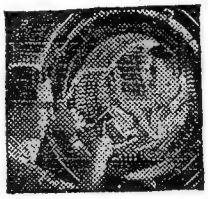

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THE BUNKHOUSE

(Continued from page 10)

big spree after each big winning, then he could always go to the house manager or owner of any big gambling place and borrow his principal loan.

That is, the manager would loan him money to set in on a game, and among the best known, and sharpest gamblers, this principal loan ran into hundreds of dollars.

It made no difference how much he cheated at cards, once let a gambler fail to pay back the principal loan, and the fact went the rounds of gambling houses far and wide, by a kind of grapevine method, and he found himself practically disgraced. He became known as not worthy of a principal loan.

Gamblers Were Proud

There was another peculiar thing about those early day professional gamblers. They were proud, and when they were broke, they dressed more flashily than when they had plenty of money. When they were in the chips they were wont to flash their wealth in order to impress everyone with their importance, and when they were broke they dressed in their best and flashiest clothes in order to give the impression that they had plenty of money.

After mastering the art of being a gunman and gambler, Plummer longed for power, and after pistol-whipping a few of the town's citizens who interfered with his pleasure, just three years after arriving in the mining camp he was elected City Marshal.

His Lady Fair

Of course every gambler and gunman of the type must have a lady fair upon whom to shower gifts and affections, but in picking his lady fair, Plummer was careless and picked a married woman. When the unfortunate husband came home at exactly the wrong time, there was really nothing the young marshal could do except to kill him, shoot him dead on his own door-step.

For this crime he received a sentence of ten years in the penitentiary, but in a short time, with a good lawyer, a plea of tuberculosis and a soft-hearted governor, he was pardoned and went back to Nevada City.

He did not, however, tarry long in the city, as at a dance celebrating his release from prison, one of the male attendants incurred his displeasure—and was promptly rapped over the head with Plummer's gun and pronounced dead! The former marshal lit out for parts unknown.

He was not long out of the limelight, however, for he soon bobbed up at Washoe, where he held up a Wells Fargo Express stage loaded with bullion. He was promptly

arrested, just as promptly acquitted, and in the meantime, having learned that the fellow whom he had rapped over the head with his six-gun had not died after all, he returned to Nevada City.

Again he killed another man over a woman, was arrested and sent to jail, but in a few days bribed someone to slip him a couple of guns, and held up the turnkey and escaped, taking with him an outlaw named Mayfield whom he released from jail.

Plummer next showed up at a new mining camp known as Oro Fina. Soon after his arrival, in a drunken spree in a dance hall, Plummer killed the dance hall owner. Once again he won the affections of another married woman and took her with him to Lewiston, then the capital of Montana Territory, where he spent a very profitable three weeks gambling. But, so many people became so suspicious of the fine poker hands that Mr. Plummer seemed always to hold, that the climate really became unhealthy for him and he moved on.

A Partner in Crime

Next he showed up at Gold Creek where he formed an alliance with Jack Cleveland, who was known as an expert robber specializing in holdups. For a time, then, with Plummer furnishing the ideas, and Cleveland doing the heavy work, the firm made a nice living, and then they made the mistake of both falling in love with the same girl.

Soon it looked as though there would be a duel to the death between them. However, they reached an agreement, and they both dropped the girl, moving on to Bannack to start another crime wave.

Bannack was full of badmen, and the scant attention attracted by Plummer irked him. He decided to do something about it, so one night in a crowded saloon he revived the argument over the girl with his partner Cleveland, and shot him dead with much gusto.

The act, however, boomeranged upon him, and instead of being a hero, he was arrested by the sheriff and brought to trial. Again he was lucky enough to be acquitted. Then he swore that he would kill the sheriff who arrested him. He continued for a week or more telling the citizens that he was gunning for the sheriff. He was really going to make them realize that he was a badman, he thought.

As Sheriff Crawford and Plummer both did their drinking in the same saloon, it was natural that they should meet and the battle was on, but while Plummer was engaging in much talk and setting the stage for a grandstand play, the sheriff beat him to the

[*Turn page*]

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draw, and shot him in his gun-arm, breaking it and rendering Plummer useless as a gunman for some time to come.

Then, just to show his disdain for the self-styled badman, the sheriff refused to pump more lead into the body of the outlaw and allowed him to live.

Being determined, however, to be a big shot at any cost, soon after the shooting affray, when the sheriff resigned to go back East, Plummer took over the job as sheriff.

Having become sheriff, his first act was to appoint two men of his own caliber, Buck Stinson and Ned Ray, as his chief deputies. They were immediately assigned the task of bringing to an end the life of a former deputy named Dillingham, whose knowledge of past events was dangerous to the cause of the new sheriff.

Dillingham was assassinated within the shadow of the courthouse of Virginia City, and soon after that Plummer rode over from Bannack, called upon the sheriff of Virginia City, gave him the preference of resigning or meeting a like fate.

The "Innocents"

The sheriff chose to resign, and Plummer immediately took over the position of sheriff of Virginia City also, and there followed a complete organization of one of the greatest gangs of road agents the West has ever known. Twenty-seven men, each and every one measuring well up to the standards of the worst badman. So that they would recognize each other, each member wore a certain kind of tie, all trimmed their mustaches in a certain manner, and each knew the password, which, strangely enough, was "Innocent."

The purpose of the gang was to prey upon the stage coach line and independent travel between Bannack and Virginia City. Every department was manned by specialists, and experienced horse thieves were used to secure mounts for the gang.

There followed one of the greatest crime waves of the West. There was murder, robbery and more murder and robbery, until it seemed that no one with any wealth at all was in the least bit safe. The citizens had become suspicious of the sheriff, rumors had been going around, but there was no one who had any real evidence who was bold enough to talk. Such a state of lawlessness could not go on forever, and so a vigilante committee was organized.

The vigilantes went to work in earnest. They hung people on suspicion, and in all probability hanged some who were innocent, but just about this time Plummer, in enlarging his gang, took in a fellow named "Red" Yeager. Red's life with the gang was

short and he was soon gathered in by the vigilantes, and just before he was hung he talked, told all about the gang and the leaders.

His body was hardly cold before the vigilantes had taken Plummer, Stinson and Ray. The evidence being all in, there was no reason for delay. It was simply another case of speedy frontier justice. All three were hanged together, and thus ended another gang of the West's badmen. *Adios.*

—FOGHORN CLANCY.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

THE early history of Western towns is always interesting. Most of those places seemed to blossom out over night and were brought into being for various reasons. Some because of the coming of the railroads, others because there was gold in the region. Many of them were boom towns that had their day of glory that swiftly passed, and then the towns faded into obscurity.

Cheyenne was one of the towns that lived and prospered, and its early days play a vital part in ON TO CHEYENNE, the smashing, action-packed Bob Pryor novel by Tom Curry in the next issue of THE RIO KID WESTERN.

Paul Tate, editor of the *Cheyenne Times,* and his young assistant Frank Warren, knew that the editorial they planned to publish in the frontier newspaper was dynamite, but that did not frighten them. The editor was a crusader and he always fought for right and justice.

"Whenever a new town springs up, the thieves hurry to it to prey on the decent folks, before law and order can be established," Tate told Warren. "It's the duty of the press to expose such men, arouse the public so they will know whom to fight. That's what a paper is for, in my opinion—we should give not only the news but we should stand for what's right!"

The editorial was aimed directly at George Hansinger, who was the chief of the Cheyenne underworld. But Hansinger was powerful and had ruthless men always at his beck and call. He appeared at the office of the paper that night, leading a pack of killers.

It was Hansinger who put a bullet from a derringer into Paul Tate's heart. Warren fought desperately at great odds. He threw a monkey wrench at the oil lamp, and as it dropped it set the building that housed the paper on fire. In the darkness Warren found a trapdoor and hid beneath the floor, then managed to get away from the building. He found a horse and was riding out of town when a bullet hit him and everything went black. . . .

[*Turn page*]

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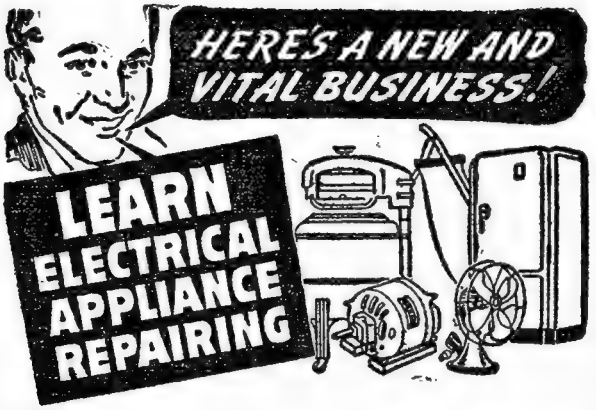

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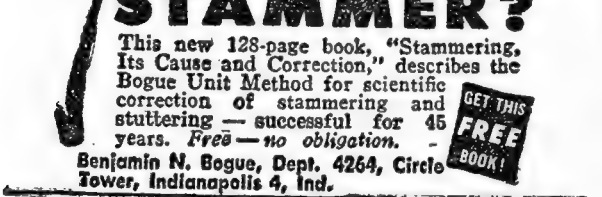
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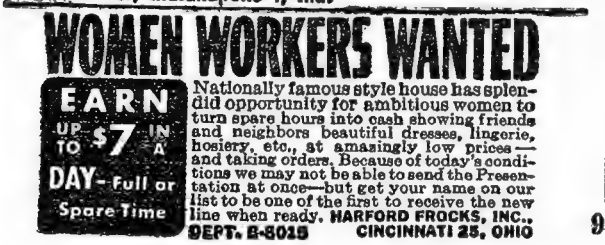
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Out on the Wyoming plains the Rio Kid and Celestino Mireles, his Mexican trail pard, were hunting buffalo with Buffalo Bill Cody, when they discovered an Indian hiding in a draw. The redman waved a flag of truce, and announced that he was Johnny Three Snakes, and led them to the badly wounded and delirious Frank Warren.

The Rio Kid and his friends took Warren to a nearby wagon train, left him there after meeting the folks with the train, and returned to the spot where they had left Colonel Cody.

Then Bob Pryor rode on to see General Grenville Dodge, Chief Engineer of the Union Pacific, who had asked the Rio Kid to report to him as soon as possible.

At the railroad construction camp Pryor found General Dodge and the two men talked.

"I sent for you, Rio Kid, because a serious problem has developed," General Dodge said. "We're nearing Cheyenne, which will be an important stop for the railroad. A number of my boys, who have run into the settlement during their time off, have been knocked over the head, robbed, beaten. Several have been killed when they resisted.

"It's been reported to me that there's an organization in the town responsible for all this dirty work. They're lot-jumping, too, trying to hold up the railroad, and seize the best locations. I want you to go quietly into Cheyenne, look things over and see how we can smash this outlaw bunch that has taken over."

After they had talked a little longer the Rio Kid took his leave of the Chief Engineer. The new assignment pleased him. That it might prove dangerous only made it more stimulating to the Rio Kid.

From the time the Rio Kid entered the town he found that men were roaming the streets robbing unsuspecting victims. Pryor managed to get in with the tough element and make them think he was one of them, and even rode with them on a rustling expedition. He found the outlaws planned to attack the people of the wagon train who were taking care of Frank Warren.

He found a chance to get away and warn the people with the wagon train and he joined them in a thrilling battle which packs plenty of punch!

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THE MEEK SHALL INHERIT, by L. Ernenwein, is an unusual story in the series about the town of Broken Bow, which also appears in the next issue of THE RIO KID WESTERN. Lee Sing, proprietor of the Shanghai Cafe, has his own way of fighting badmen, a way which is certainly novel but also quite effective. You'll like this yarn.

There will also be other exciting stories of the rangeland and Foghorn Clancy will be on hand with more interesting chatter. The next issue will be well worthwhile—look forward to it!

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

WE ARE eager to have our readers step right up and have their say! We value your opinions—so tell us which stories you liked best in the magazine, and about those which did not suit your fancy. Please address all letters and postcards to The Editor, THE RIO KID WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York, 16, N. Y.

And now let's take a look at some of the many letters we have been receiving:

I think THE RIO KID WESTERN is the best Western magazine published. I got my first copy about a year ago and I have read it ever since. Each story is better than the next one, but GOLDEN CONQUEST outranked others, such as BORDER PATROL and RAIDERS of NEW MEXICO. Keep up the good work and let's see if the next story will stand in line also. —*John H. Hughes, Jr., New Orleans, La.*

Thanks for your letter, John. You're what can be called a real Rio Kid fan.

I enjoy THE RIO KID WESTERN very much. Keep up the good work. I am keeping every issue and making a real library.—*Homer Burr, Dorset, Ohio*

That should make quite an interesting library, Homer, and thanks for your letter.

I always get a kick out of every Rio Kid novel that I read and I've been a steady reader for some time now. Can't say which story I liked best, for I've enjoyed them all. Those Broken Bow yarns are good, too.—*Dave Clark, Chicago, Ill.*

Those are kind words, Dave. Hope that we continue to please you in future issues.

What I enjoy most about Bob Pryor's adventures is the historical characters in the stories—they certainly make every story seem real. Besides, it is interesting to learn more about those famous men who played such important parts in the making of the old West. —*John Davis, Boston, Mass.*

We find those historical characters interesting, too, John. Thanks for your letter. That's about all the mail we can quote from this time, but let's hear from more of our readers. We'll print excerpts from many more letters in coming issues. See you soon!

—THE EDITOR.

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FORTY-DOLLAR SCALP

(Concluded from page 83)

have been lost in the two years you tried to catch this bull?"

Sam McCann and his hands halted in their tracks, their faces ashen with terror. If once the Brahma got loose, their lives were not worth a plugged peso. They knew it. They'd never reach their broncs with the bull after them. They would never stop the bull with six-gun fire before the animal struck them. Ram Smith might get to his waiting pinto, but not McCann and Jack Roach and the cook and the other three men.

They were trapped like coyote pups in a cave. To run for the river meant to wallow in quicksand.

SAM McCANN cried out in terror.

"Don't let that bull loose!" His tone became conciliatory. "Look here, Smith, I aimed to pay you a bonus for that bull. I'm a square-shooter. Don't let that bull loose and I'll give you a hundred dollars cash as soon as we get back to the ranch. You don't have to work any longer."

"I'm quitting right now," Ram Smith snapped. "You hired my pinto for a hundred dollars. I want the money now. Put all your artillery on the ground. Send the cook back to the ranch for the money. Write me out a paper telling what the money is for. Do it fast, McCann, before I change my mind. I also want fifty dollars more for breaking five broncs. Try and shoot me, and I'll let you have both barrels of my derringer through the heart. You over-played your hand this time, McCann. I happen to be the champion bull-dogger and calf-roper along the Border, and I'm heading for the Montana contests. Do you want me to let the Brahma up?"

"No, keep him down, Smith!" McCann wailed. "I'll pay up. I got the money here with me. I aimed to pay you all along."

The Rambler chuckled as McCann wrote the paper, counted out the greenbacks from his wallet, then shucked his guns. The Rocking W crew stole back for their broncs, mounted and rode off, McCann in the lead.

The Rambler picked up his winnings, holstered his own six-gun, then mounted the pinto.

He stood in the stirrups, waved his hat at the riders on the grassy knoll.

"Those pigging strings will need a knife in the knots, McCann," the Rambler shouted. "You won't be able to untie them with your fingers. But the funniest joke of all is that the cows with the bull have the hoof-and-mouth disease. You'll have to shoot the Brahma before the month is out. *Adios.*"

A hidden six-gun crashed on the grassy knoll and the bullet went over the Rambler's head as he rode into the prickly pear on the high-stepping, dodging pinto.

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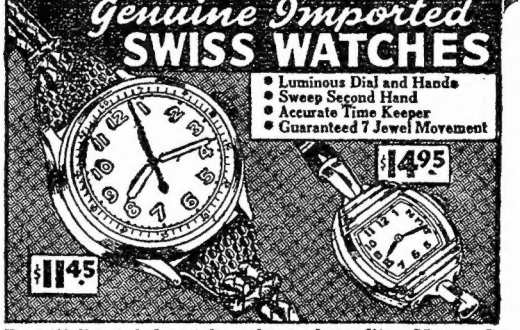

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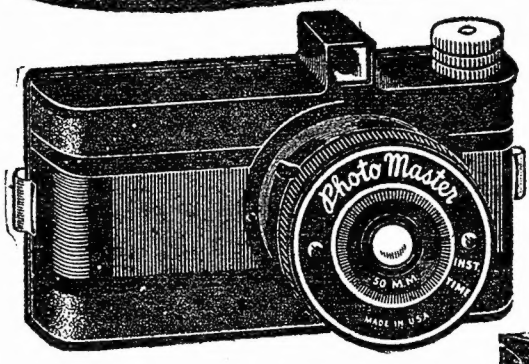

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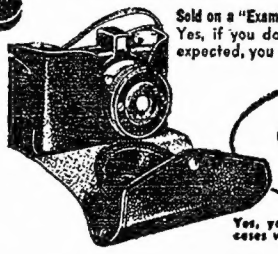

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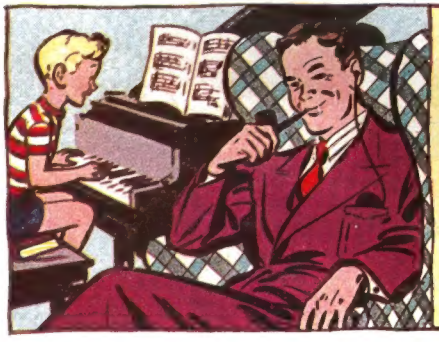
HANDIE-TALKIE—five pounds of concentrated two-way radio. Powered with "Mini-Max" batteries, it will be ideal, when available, for fire fighting, flood control, big construction jobs, exploring, auto racing.



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For longer life, insist on "Eveready" batteries—dated to assure freshness. And fresh batteries last longer!

SIZED LIKE A CIGARETTE CASE, this radio is easily carried. Personal earphone permits listening without bothering others. Strong, day-long reception, thanks to the tiny, powerful "Mini-Max" battery, already available at dealers.

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